

THE  
*INVESTIGATORS*  
in

**THE MYSTERY OF THE  
CRYSTAL SKULL**



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Jupiter, Pete and Bob accompany Uncle Titus to help Julia Scott clear out the house of her grandfather, Hunter Scott, who has recently died. While there, they learn that Hunter has a valuable Maya treasure. However, nobody knows where it is hidden. With a few clues in hand, The Three Investigators take on the task to locate it. Very soon, they encounter several sinister people, all wanting to get hold of the treasure—a crystal skull that is believed to have healing powers...

The Three Investigators  
in  
The Mystery of the Crystal Skull

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## 1. The House of Hunter Scott

"This looks like a haunted house!" Pete Crenshaw said to Bob Andrews when he drove his MG into the driveway of Hunter Scott's old house.

The lonely house in the clearing undoubtedly had something eerie about it. The former light-grey paint had almost completely peeled off the wooden façade. In some places, the walls were so rotten that one could see through holes to the framework of the beams. The roof truss was sagging. Some windows were broken.

The house was secluded on Lone Oak Hill, a small hill near Rocky Beach. It was shaded by a single ancient oak tree, which had given the hill its name. A light pine grove spread out all around, where pigeons cooed in the heat of the early afternoon.

Parked in front of Pete's car was a raggedy pick-up truck where Titus Jones and his nephew Jupiter had just come out from. Pete and Bob out of the MG and joined them.

Bob looked up at the house to the little tower sticking out of the roof. On its east side, an old station clock pointed permanently at half past five. "Time must have stood still here," he murmured.

"If this house is not renovated from the ground up soon, it will collapse completely in a year or two," Jupiter surmised.

"You'd need quite a bit of money for that." Pete scratched his head.

"You'd basically have to replace everything," Uncle Titus agreed and slammed the driver's door of the pick-up truck. The little man in the blue overalls walked up to the house, knocked on the boarding of the verandah and expertly examined the wood. "Yes, all of it, really. I'm afraid Miss Scott doesn't have the money for that."

The Three Investigators had promised Jupiter's uncle to help him with a household clearance. Jupiter's uncle Titus and aunt Mathilda ran The Jones Salvage Yard in Rocky Beach. It was widely known as the place to go when one needed something that was odd, unusual, or hard to find. Jupiter had been living with his uncle and aunt since his parents died in an accident many years ago.

One of Titus Jones's old customers named Hunter Scott had passed away. His granddaughter had asked Uncle Titus for help.

They entered the verandah. When Jupiter knocked on the door, he noticed that it had not fallen into the lock at all. It swung open with a creak. Behind it was a gloomy reception hall. Dust danced in the bright rectangle of sunlight that now fell into the room.

"Hello?" called Jupiter. "Miss Scott?"

Suddenly a huge dog raced out of the darkness. It was a Newfoundland with dark brown fur. With a long, dripping tongue and pink lips, the huge dog stormed through the hall towards the door. Startled, the First Investigator jumped to the side. However, the dog was not aiming at him at all—but at Pete.

Before the Second Investigator could react, the four-legged monster jumped at him. The dog's front legs smashed against Pete's chest and the dog's enormous weight knocked him off his feet. He fell backwards onto the verandah, and the monster's bared teeth reached out at Pete's throat. Then the dog began to lick his face.

Bob burst out laughing.

"Growler! Growler, stop that! Get off!" A petite woman in her forties rushed out from inside the house, grabbed the dog vigorously by the collar and dragged him back. Disappointed, Growler let go of Pete.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, I was upstairs and didn't hear you! Did you hurt yourself? I don't know how to break this dog out of his habit. Not to worry, he only does this to people he likes."

"Well then," muttered the Second Investigator, wiping first the dusty paw prints off his T-shirt and then his hand on his jeans.

"You're Titus Jones, right?" the lady asked.

"That's me." Uncle Titus took off his cap and held out his hand to the woman. "This is my nephew Jupiter and his friends Pete and Bob... and I suppose you are Hunter's granddaughter."

She nodded. "Julia Scott. Thank you for coming, Mr Jones."

Miss Scott was wearing blue dungarees and a white T-shirt. She had tied her honey blonde hair with the first grey strands into a sloppy plait.

"I'm completely overwhelmed," she continued. "My grandfather died ten days ago. It happened terribly fast. He got sick and had to go to hospital all of a sudden—just when I was at a friend's wedding in Florida, of all places. I couldn't come back because of a stupid hurricane there. All flights were cancelled for three days, so I wasn't with him when he died."

She paused and sighed heavily. "We were very close, even though I haven't been able to take care of him as much since I moved to San Francisco a few years ago. I have a small flower shop there. Fortunately, a lady from the Women's Club of Rocky Beach was by his side until the end. She checked on him regularly over the last few years, so he wasn't alone. I guess that's the most important thing."

"We're sorry to hear that, Miss Scott," Pete said sympathetically.

"Oh, well. Of course I'm sad, but my grandfather lived to be ninety-nine and was healthy and content all his life. What more could I have wished for?"

"Ninety-nine!" marvelled the Second Investigator.

Julia Scott nodded. "He spent most of his life in this house. That's many decades of collecting junk."

"I remember your grandfather well," said Uncle Titus. "He used to come to my salvage yard a lot."

"I know. He once said you were one of the few people who understood him and his passion for collecting. A brother in spirit, I suppose."

"I am honoured." Uncle Titus indicated a bow.

"My grandfather has now left all his stuff to me, along with this dilapidated house," Miss Scott said. "Even the lock on the front door was damaged when I reached here a few days ago. I suppose someone had broken into the house, but I couldn't tell if anything was missing."

"In any case, I don't have the money to renovate this place. So I guess it would be best to sell it immediately before it collapses. Before that, I have to get rid of all this stuff as soon as possible, and then go back to San Francisco and take care of my shop. Business hasn't been too good. That's why I called you, Mr Jones. I don't know anything about junk, what all this stuff is worth and so forth. As you suggested, I've advertised a household clearance. Soon the first people will come and rummage through the things. I am very grateful to you for coming here to help me."

"Don't worry, Miss Scott. I'll get the best prices for you... and Bob has agreed to take a closer look at the books."

"I used to work part-time at the Rocky Beach Public Library," Bob explained, "so I know my way around books a bit."

"That's good, because I don't. Anyway, the books are not for sale today. I've locked the library specially, otherwise it's too much chaos for me. You can have a look at them in the next few days. Today I need you guys to carry furniture and so on. It's best if I show you around the place."

She led Uncle Titus and The Three Investigators into the hall. Inside, the light was dim. The windows were either made of coloured glass ornaments or were so dull and dusty that they let in very little light.

The hall was covered with thick dark carpets. From the ceiling hung countless light fixtures from different eras—colourful plastic globes from the sixties, elegant brass fixtures with crystals and multiple arms, and sweeping shimmering chandeliers. The foot of a wide flight of steps was guarded by a two-metre tall knight statue in a full armour suit complete with chain mail and a halberd.

Velvet armchairs, wicker chairs and *chaise longues* were scattered throughout the room. There was also a dusty jukebox, a foosball table and a potter's wheel. The walls were hung full of framed pictures. On the steps of the wide staircase to the left and right were busts, sculptures and dolls made of plaster, pewter, porcelain and earthenware.

"This looks just like your salvage yard!" marvelled Bob.

"It's much neater here..." Uncle Titus added tonelessly. His attention was already on the knight statue, which he was examining enthusiastically.

"If you find anything particularly valuable, please let me know so I don't accidentally sell a real Rembrandt for five dollars."

Uncle Titus nodded, but hardly seemed to have listened.

A car stopped outside. Shortly afterwards, a young couple stood in the front doorway. "We've come for the household clearance."

... And they were not the only ones. Visitors were arriving by the minute. Julia Scott led them into the house. "Please take your time to look around, including the other rooms and upstairs." She began nervously swirling her bunch of keys around her index finger. "If you have any questions, please just ask me or Mr Jones here."

However, Uncle Titus had already disappeared into the next room. Through the open door he had discovered a collection of old typewriters that magically attracted him.

Most of the visitors dispersed. Three of them, however, immediately had a question for Julia.

"I'm looking for a nice old tea set," said an elderly lady, squinting at Julia through her thick glasses.

"Over in the living room," Julia explained.

"I'm looking for a used bicycle," said a gentleman in an ill-fitting, stained suit.

"I'm sorry, but my grandfather didn't collect bicycles."

Disappointed, the gentleman went away.

"I am looking for a crystal skull," said a young man with shoulder-length hair. He was dressed entirely in white linen. Around his neck he wore a necklace with a silver crescent moon pendant.

"A what?"

"A crystal skull."

Julia shook her head in irritation. "My grandfather didn't own anything like that."

"Yes, he did," the man insisted. "A friend sent me. He knew your grandfather. The skull comes from Yucatán in Mexico. Your grandfather bought it at an auction."

"There must be some mistake. I would have noticed a thing like that."

"Are you quite sure?"

"Yes," Julia said firmly. "I have done nothing but sift through my grandfather's possessions for the last few days. I wouldn't have missed a crystal skull... because I think skulls are terrible."

"Maybe you did miss it."

Julia sighed indignantly. "Yes, perhaps," she admitted, "but there's nothing I can do about that now. If I can find it, I'll put it aside for you, okay? Perhaps you could come back another day. Excuse me, but someone over there needs my help."

"Of course," the young man murmured, nodded and left.

"This is going to be fun," Julia moaned and turned her attention to an elegantly dressed lady who had been seeking her attention for quite a while.

The Three Investigators left Miss Scott to her fate and strolled from room to room. Whether living room, kitchen or guest room—there were bizarre things to marvel at everywhere.

"By the way, fellas," Jupiter said, "our official assignment is indeed to help move furniture. However, Aunt Mathilda took me aside before we left and implored me to make sure Uncle Titus doesn't buy half the house himself."

"An exciting challenge," Pete said, while Jupiter's uncle just stumbled across the hallway with two typewriters, a floor lamp and two human-sized candlesticks under his arm. On his head, he wore a pith helmet. He took the things outside and cast covetous glances at the knight statue again as he passed.

Julia Scott came to them again. She was stressed. "Boys, could you go out there—"

She was interrupted by a lanky man in a black leather jacket. He carried a motorbike helmet in the crook of his arm.

"Excuse me, ma'am," he mumbled into his bushy moustache. "The door at the end of the corridor on the first floor, it's stuck."

Growler wagged his tail wildly. Julia Scott had a hard time stopping him from jumping up at the man.

"It's not stuck, I locked it," she explained. "That is the library. I haven't sifted through the books yet. That's enough, Growler! Only what you find in the rooms with the open doors is for sale."

A small, thin woman came by with a huge gramophone in her arms that she could barely carry. She promptly tripped over a fold in the carpet and threatened to fall into Julia along with the gramophone.

"Careful!" shouted Pete, holding the woman by the arm while Julia was pulled back by the man in the leather jacket.

"Thank you," Julia said irritably. The man nodded, lowered his head and left.

"Wait, I'll carry the gramophone outside for you," Pete offered and took it from the lady.

Next, The Three Investigators helped the young couple carry a chest of drawers and an elderly gentleman take down a monstrous chandelier.

"I'll go for a holiday somewhere when this is over," Julia moaned as they all caught their breath for a moment. "I wanted to sell my grandfather's things... but it feels like looting!"

Suddenly there was a rumble above their heads.

"Did you hear that?" asked Bob, looking up at the ceiling.

"Someone probably dropped something," Pete thought, "or a picture came off the wall."

Julia shook her head in annoyance. "That clearly came from the library."

"I thought you said it was locked?" Bob asked.

"I'll go check!" Hurriedly, she marched up the stairs, taking two steps at a time. Growler ran after her excitedly.

"There seems to be trouble," Jupiter remarked. "Come quickly, fellas."

Towards one end of the first floor, Julia stood in front of a double door and rattled the knob. "Hey! Open up now!"

There was a rumbling inside the room. Then there was a clang like shattering glass. It sounded as if someone was taking half the furniture apart.

"Open up!" yelled Julia.

"The key!" urged Jupiter. "You have to open the door."

"Of course, wait a minute!" However, the bunch of keys was no longer dangling from her index finger, nor was it in any of the many pockets of her overalls.

"No problem," Pete said and reflexively fumbled for his lock pick set in his back trouser pocket, only to discover that he did not have it with him as he had not been prepared for an investigation.

"Can you kick the door down?"

Pete looked at Miss Scott with wide eyes. "Seriously?"

"One broken door does not matter to me." Julia stepped aside.

"As you wish," the Second Investigator muttered and kicked with all his might. Wood splintered around the lock and the door flew open.

The little man in the leather jacket stood in front of a grandfather clock lying on the floor. In his hands he held something shimmering, It was a glass skull! Startled, the man turned around.

"Hey!" cried Julia.

The guy put the skull in his motorbike helmet, jumped to the window, swung it open and climbed out.

"Well, wait. I'll get him!" The Second Investigator gave chase.

"Pete, what are you doing?" shouted Bob.

By then Pete had already jumped out of the window.

## 2. Damages in the Library

The roof of the verandah was only one and a half metres below the window. When Pete landed on it, his right foot punched through a few dilapidated roof slates and got caught in it.

“Darn!” Struggling to find his footing, he tried to free himself. When he finally succeeded, he had lost precious time. He swung over the edge of the roof and landed springily on the lawn in front of the house.

Two visitors who were just leaving the house cried out. In shock, one woman dropped the coffee pot she had just bought.

“Sorry!” Pete shouted and ran after the fugitive into the pine forest.

He saw the man running through the pine grove towards the main road. However, the Second Investigator decided to remain on the private roadway. Even though he would not be any closer to the fugitive, here on a paved surface, he hoped that he could run faster and reach the main road first. It was worth a try.

Shortly afterwards, the Second Investigator had reached the main road. A good hundred metres further on, there was a red motorbike on which a beefy man with light hair was sitting. He looked towards the forest and did not see Pete at first. The leather jacket guy broke through the trees and immediately jumped onto the pillion seat behind the rider, who, at that moment, noticed the Second Investigator and reacted immediately. The rider started the engine and accelerated.

In the first few metres, the vehicle lurched. In the process, something fell out of the leather jacket guy’s pocket. The next moment, they disappeared around the next bend.

Without hesitation, Pete raced along the road to the place where the guy had dropped something. On the road was Julia’s bunch of keys.

When Pete returned to the house, Bob, Jupiter and Uncle Titus had gathered on the verandah. By now, most of the visitors had realized that something dramatic had happened and had rushed outside as well. They stood whispering in small groups in front of the house and looked expectantly at Pete.

“What happened?” asked the First Investigator.

Pete shook his head. “An accomplice was waiting for him. They took off on a motorbike.”

“What a bummer. Did you see the number plate?”

“Too far away. I couldn’t even make out the model—only that it was red, with yellow flame stickers on the side.”

Julia stepped out of the house and shooed a few more visitors in front of her. “Sorry, but you heard what happened,” she said, addressing everyone. “I’m afraid I have to stop the sale today. I will set another date for it, I promise.”

Some people grumbled, but most were understanding. One by one, everyone got into their cars and drove away.

“So, what happened?” Julia turned to Pete.

He reported on his short pursuit.

“You risked a lot. That was brave of you. Thank you, Pete.”

"You're welcome." The Second Investigator waved it off and gave Julia her bunch of keys.

"Where did you get these?"

"It was stolen from you," Jupiter suspected.

"But how?" Julia looked down at herself. The pockets of her overalls were quite large and wide.

"Well, up to a certain point, the events can be reconstructed well." Jupiter cleared his throat. "The man with the leather jacket approached you in the hall. He pointed out the locked door to you. You explained to him why the library was locked. Then, when the woman with the gramophone almost fell, he pulled you away. In the process, he must have taken the key from your pocket unnoticed. He entered the library, locked the door from the inside and started looking for something, I suppose."

"You sound like a policeman... or like a detective."

"This is no coincidence." Jupiter pulled a slightly crumpled business card out of his trouser pocket and handed it to Julia. The card said:



"I don't quite understand. I think you're helping your uncle in his salvage yard... and you still go to school. Now you're investigators all of a sudden?"

"They help me when they find the time," Uncle Titus explained, "and when they are not chasing some criminals."

"Quite successfully chasing criminals, I might add," Jupiter said.

"I believe you. Your analysis was razor sharp. You know what's strange? The man in the leather jacket looked familiar. When he approached me about the locked door, I thought I'd seen him somewhere before... but I just can't figure out when or where."

"Think about it calmly," Jupiter advised. "Meanwhile, I'd like to have a look at the library. Maybe we'll find out more."

Julia hesitated briefly, but then agreed.

They returned to the now deserted house and climbed the stairs to the library. Now Pete also had time to take a closer look around the room with the three large windows.

The right wall consisted entirely of a huge shelf built right up to the ceiling, overflowing with books. In one corner stood a small antique desk, in another, a massive wing chair. In between was an old glass cabinet. It had been filled with old figurines, but now everything had been ripped out and strewn across the floor. The grandfather clock, which had had its place next to the display case, had been pulled down. The brass pendulum lay on the carpet, and the glass door had shattered into numerous pieces. In addition, the burglar had kicked a hole on the wooden side.

Julia had stopped in the doorway and was now gasping for breath. "The beautiful clock! Why did that guy do that?"

"Because he was looking for something," Jupiter surmised, "namely the skull he was holding in his hand when we surprised him. The skull must have been hidden in the clock. The thief probably proceeded cautiously and quietly at first, but then he had a mishap. I suppose he dropped the brass pendulum. That was the thump we heard downstairs."

When you knocked on the door, the fellow realized he had been discovered. He had to hurry and now took the clock apart with brute force. He also swept the figurines out of the display case." Jupiter noticed that Julia had still not entered the library. "Won't you come in?"

"I don't particularly like this room," she murmured sheepishly, but then entered and looked perplexed at the debris of the grandfather clock. "There was supposed to be a skull hidden in there?"

Jupiter nodded. "Probably in the plinth. You see, the guy kicked a hole in it. I suppose he would have opened it differently if he hadn't had the mishap with the pendulum. He would have put the skull in his motorbike helmet, put the gloves on it, quietly left this room, locked the door and put the bunch of keys somewhere. No one would have known about the theft."

"But how did he even know about this skull?" asked Julia.

"He wasn't the only one," Bob remembered. "There was that guy in the white clothes who asked for a crystal skull."

"That's right," Julia said. "I didn't know what he was talking about. What is that supposed to be? A crystal skull?"

"I read something about it once," Bob said. "If I remember correctly, they're human skulls made out of crystal. They're supposed to be from the Aztecs or the Maya or something." He did a quick image search on his mobile phone and showed the others a photo from a Paris museum where such a skull was on display.

The skull looked like it was made of some sort of crystal glass. It had anatomically incorrect proportions and was not very detailed. Pete found it a bit creepy, but Julia's reaction was much more violent. She took a horrified step back and turned her head to the side.

"Are you all right, Julia?" asked Bob anxiously.

She nodded. "I'm scared of skulls—real or otherwise." She laughed uncertainly. "It's silly, I know. Don't think anything of it. I just don't want to look."

"Do you know this skull?" Jupiter asked. "Or do you know something about it?"

She shook her head. "I just find the picture creepy. Maybe I should be glad that the thief stole the thing... but I'm sorry about the grandfather clock. My grandfather always loved it—like everything else in this room. It was his favourite room, where he spent most of his time." She shrugged her shoulders.

"Don't you want to know what the skull is all about?" asked Jupiter.

"Yes, but the thief is now long gone."

"Let us investigate," Jupiter suggested. "The Three Investigators offer you their services."

"Well... all right... if you really want to."

"Jupe does," Pete clarified. "Bob's and my opinions don't matter that much in such cases."

Julia smiled amusedly. "Then I hereby officially commission you to solve the mystery of the crystal skull."

### 3. Crystal Skulls

“A knight statue?” cried Aunt Mathilda in horror, even before the pick-up had come to a complete stop in the yard. “Are you out of your senses, Titus Jones?”

“His name is Archie,” Titus said a little meekly. “Hunter Scott named him that.”

“I don’t care about that at all. It’s a knight statue! I knew it was going to be like this. I thought you were going to help this lady sell her stuff—to other people! Who’s going to want this thing?”

“Nobody,” Uncle Titus admitted bravely. “I thought we’d put it by the road... as an eye-catcher!”

“There’s already a rusty motorbike, a hang glider and a three-metre-high Michelin man. Our eye-catchers now reach from here to San Diego!”

The Three Investigators began to unload the items that Jupiter’s uncle had bought. That included the armchairs, the typewriters, the tropical hat, a box of Chinese paper fans, the potter’s wheel, a bathtub with golden lion feet, a floor lamp, a map stand and a butterfly collection. Piece by piece they moved them to the corner for new acquisitions.

Mr Meyer, an elderly gentleman who had been coming by almost every afternoon for some time, was already lying in wait like a vulture for prey, while The Three Investigators tried to arrange the items properly. Aunt Mathilda kept a strict eye on whether the boys were doing everything right. Stress was in the air.

Jupiter sighed. “You should proceed to check things out on the computer at Headquarters, Bob. It’s almost closing time anyway. Pete and I can manage here alone.”

Bob was responsible for research work in their investigation team. His brief picture search at Julia’s had already shown him that there was a lot to learn about crystal skulls, so he had to get started right away.

Headquarters was the office of The Three Investigators. It was set up in an old mobile home trailer and equipped with everything a real office needed—computer, telephone, refrigerator, a laboratory and shelves of documents and archives of their previous cases. The trailer was hidden under a mountain of junk and scrap metal in one corner of the salvage yard. There were several secret entrances to the trailer, but mostly the boys used the Cold Gate—a discarded refrigerator that was embedded in the huge pile of junk. Inside the refrigerator, there was a secret mechanism that allowed the back wall to be slid aside. This provided access to a short dark tunnel that led to the door of the trailer.

Inside the trailer, Bob switched on the computer and began his work. He eagerly made notes on a small pad. When Jupiter and Pete joined him after half an hour, sweaty and exhausted, he had already found out a lot. The First Investigator took a Coke from the fridge and plopped down next to Pete on a sagging sofa. “Shoot!”

“So, crystal skulls are the subject of the most fantastic stories,” Bob said. “They supposedly come from the Maya, the Incas or the Aztecs—or rather, they existed in all three cultures. The sources contradict each other.

“The first skull of this kind was found at the end of the nineteenth century during excavation work at an ancient Maya site in Mexico. In the following decades, crystal skulls appeared all over Central and South America. They are made of quartz crystal and pose a

mystery to scientists. Quartz crystal is not easy to work with. You actually need modern tools for it, which the indigenous peoples did not yet have. How they still managed to make the skulls is the subject of many legends. Some say it simply took a very, very long time—possibly several hundred years.”

“Several hundred years?” Pete gasped.

“The others say that the skulls are not from the Maya or Aztecs at all, but from a long-gone advanced civilization. Unfortunately, the age of the skulls cannot be determined with the usual methods. A somewhat more adventurous claim says that the crystal skulls came from aliens and are actually something like data storage devices.”

“Okay, now I’m not understanding that,” Pete said. “Aliens? Data storage?”

“I can imagine what is meant by that,” Jupiter said. “Quartz have the potential of storing large amounts of digital information reliably for very long periods of time.”

Bob nodded. “You might get the idea that the skulls aren’t man-made at all, but that a highly evolved alien species made them and used them as a storage medium... or else as a medicine chest.”

Pete looked at him questioningly. “Medicine chest? Again I’m not understanding that.”

“Crystals are sometimes said to have healing powers. In the case of crystal skulls, these powers are said to be particularly great. They are said to be able to heal illnesses and prolong life—especially the so-called Yucatán skulls are said to have this property.”

“Yucatán? That’s the word the guy with the shoulder-length hair said when he asked Julia about the skull!”

Bob nodded. “The Yucatán skulls were all found in the same area in Mexico, logically in Yucatán. There are seven of them in all. Apparently Hunter Scott owned one of them.”

“That’s the first piece of information that helps us,” Jupiter said. “Everything else you found out has regrettably little relation to reality... or is there also more reliable sources of knowledge about these skulls?”

“They exist,” Bob replied, “but they just don’t look like much. Some researchers claim to have found out from microscopic grinding marks that the crystal skulls are all fakes—that they don’t even come from North or South America. They may have been made for the sole purpose of being discovered by researchers and making headlines.”

“That is clearly the most likely explanation,” Jupiter said.

“But even if the crystal skulls are fakes, that doesn’t mean they have no value. The most famous skulls are now in museums in Paris and London. Wherever they originally came from, they are always of interest to someone.”

“—And our interest is to unravel the mystery of how the unknown thief knew of the existence of something in the grandfather clock when not even Hunter Scott’s granddaughter had any idea.”

“The young man with the shoulder-length hair didn’t know the hiding place, but seemed to know something about the skull,” Bob said. “If only we could find that guy! Did any of you notice if he was there with a car?”

Pete and Jupiter shook their heads.

“Juupeeterrr!” Aunt Mathilda’s voice echoed across the salvage yard. “Are you hiding in your shoebox again? The knight statue is still in the middle of the path! You have to help your uncle!”

Bob looked questioningly at his colleagues.

“We don’t feel like doing any more work,” Pete admitted, “but Aunt Mathilda has no mercy.”

“I have mercy.” Bob got out of the swivel chair with a sigh and left Headquarters.

"So where do we go from here?" asked Pete as the phone rang.

Jupiter switched on the loudspeaker so that his friend could listen in. "The Three Investigators. Jupiter Jones speaking."

"Hello, Jupiter, this is Julia Scott."

"Julia! We have already started the investigation, but we are not yet—"

"Can it wait till later? Something's going on." Julia sounded tense.

Jupiter listened up. "What do you mean?"

"There's someone skulking around out here at Grandpa's house. Growler smells something."

"Did you see or hear anyone?"

"No, but the dog is all restless... and after what happened this afternoon—"

"Shall we come by and check on things?" Jupiter offered.

"I would love that."

"We're on our way. We'll be with you in ten minutes."

Jupiter and Pete left Headquarters. Bob was just trying, together with Uncle Titus, to fix Archie the knight, on a small rolling board so that they could just push him back to the salvage yard after closing time. Aunt Mathilda stood next to them and gave instructions.

"We have to go out for a while," Jupiter said and told them in short words about Julia's call. "Can we deal with the knight statue tomorrow?"

"No way!" cried Aunt Mathilda. "Tomorrow something else will come up, and before you know it, it will be Christmas and the knight will still be here. It has to be done today!"

"Just go ahead and I'll join you as soon as we're done here," Bob suggested. "Won't be long now."

"All right." The First and Second Investigators left the salvage yard, got into Pete's MG and drove off.

Lone Oak Hill was only a few minutes away from Rocky Beach. By the time the boys reached the hill, dusk had set in. Two stars were already shining in the eastern sky.

"Pull over here by the side of the road, Pete," Jupiter said when they were still some distance from Hunter Scott's house. "If there really is someone hanging around out here, we don't want to scare them away."

Pete parked the car and they got out.

"The best thing is to go through the pine grove to the house," Jupiter suggested.

They had not gone far when they already regretted the decision. The tangle of branches above their heads swallowed more daylight than they had thought. Around them, the tree trunks rose like black pillars and soon Pete was no longer sure if they were even going in the right direction.

"That was a great idea, Jupe," complained the Second Investigator. "I'm practically blind, and if we use flashlights, we might as well drive up to the house honking and with high beams."

Something crackled in the undergrowth in front of them. They stopped and listened.

"What was that?" whispered Pete.

"Probably just an animal."

"—Or a human. We're not exactly quiet either. If there's really someone here, they've probably heard us by now."

"I admit it wasn't well thought out to go through this grove. We should—"

"Shh!" Pete grabbed the First Investigator by the arm and pointed ahead with his other hand. "Do you see that?" A bluish light had appeared between the trees. "Is that coming from the house?"

Jupiter squinted his eyes and shook his head. "It's too close to the ground. Come on, let's creep nearer."

As quietly as the cracking undergrowth allowed, the two boys worked their way forward. Suddenly the blue glow went out—only to flare up again a short distance away.

"What is that?" asked Jupiter. They were perhaps fifty metres away when the light disappeared again and appeared elsewhere.

"It's a bit scary," Pete admitted.

"We have to get to the bottom of scary things," Jupiter whispered. "Then they usually lose their fright—"

A scream echoed through the forest!

Pete and Jupiter winced.

"Was that Julia?" asked Pete, startled.

"It sounded like her. Come on, hurry up!"

They ran towards the blue glow from which the scream had come from. Pete was faster and immediately pulled away from Jupiter. Jupiter's T-shirt got caught in a low-hanging branch and forced the First Investigator to stop. He tugged and pulled at his sleeve until it gave way with an ugly tear.

When Jupiter turned back towards the house, the blue glow was no longer visible. He listened into the darkness. There was a cracking sound somewhere in front of him. Someone scurried from left to right through the trees and disappeared.

What was he supposed to do? Pete was already on his way to Julia. It was wiser to stay in the forest and find out who was skulking around... or he could run to the road because whoever the unknown person was and whatever he wanted, sooner or later he would return to his car. Few people came to Lone Oak Hill on foot. Jupiter decided to try to find this car. He turned right and crept alone through the dark forest.

Pete ran between fern fronds and made his way through the dense undergrowth, always heading for the blue glow. Suddenly it went out and it became pitch dark again. Pete stopped. There was a rustling and cracking sound behind him.

"Jupe, is that you?" The Second Investigator turned around... but there was no one there. Jupiter was no longer behind him at all. He must have lost him.

"Jupe?" repeated Pete quietly. Nothing. "He's good at looking after himself," Pete muttered. Now it was all about Julia! After the scream, the Second Investigator had heard nothing more. He courageously continued on his way.

Between the trees, the pale yellow light of the verandah lighting finally came into view and made orientation easier. Pete had almost reached the clearing where the house stood when the blue glow reappeared to his left. He crept closer and stopped abruptly when he realized what the source was.

On a tree stump lay a glowing skull! Ice-blue light shone from its empty eye sockets as if from two spotlights. The Second Investigator could not avert his gaze. How was it possible that the skull glowed? Why was it here in the first place? Pete knew he had to check on Julia, but the cold glow of the skull drew him magically.

Slowly, as if approaching a shy animal, Pete walked on—and all at once the skull had disappeared. At the next moment, it reappeared twenty metres away!

The Second Investigator gasped in fright. The skull had indeed moved from one place to another as if by magic!

Panic rose in Pete, but he gathered all his courage and approached the skull. He had only gone three steps when a shadow ran towards him from the house.

Pete had no chance. Growler jumped, knocked him over and the Second Investigator fell backwards into the foliage. He tried to push the massive Newfoundland off him, but Growler seemed to think it was a fun game and kept throwing himself at the Second Investigator.

“Growler, get off!” shouted Julia from a distance.

“No, go away!” Pete yelled. “Growler, get off!”

The dog made no move to let go of Pete. By chance, Pete felt a stick on the forest ground. Perhaps that was his salvation. He propped himself up with one hand and held the stick up with the other. Instantly Growler got down from him, wagging his tail and not taking his eyes off the stick.

Pete struggled to his feet, panting. “Get the stick, you monster!” he hissed and threw the stick as far as he could into the forest. In high leaps, Growler chased after the stick.

The skull had disappeared. Where had he seen it the last time? Pete went to the spot where he suspected it was, switched on his mobile phone light and shone a light around the area. Nothing. The crystal skull was gone!

## 4. The Vanished Skull

Meanwhile, Jupiter stumbled alone through the night. The forest cleared. After three more rows of trees, he had reached the main road.

An almost full moon shone in the sky. Jupiter followed the road uphill. He had not gone far when muffled sounds came from the forest. Was it a fight? Did Pete need help?

Jupiter quickened his steps. The private roadway would be the quickest way to reach the house.

Then a car started up not far away. Headlights flashed and blinded him. Jupiter instinctively ducked, but the headlights had caught him in full. The car accelerated and sped straight towards him!

The First Investigator made a dash back into the forest. The car, a black Honda, shot past him. When Jupe stumbled back onto the road, the car had already gone around the bend.

“Darn it!” The whole action had been for nothing... or maybe not after all.

Jupiter had an idea. He pulled his mobile phone out of his pocket and dialled Bob’s number. “Bob, are you on your way?”

“Yes. Your uncle had a good idea. Archie is wearing roller skates now. I’m about to turn onto Lone Oak Drive.”

“Don’t do that! Wait at the intersection! There’s a black Honda coming down the hill. Follow it!”

“What? What happened?”

“The details are still beyond me, but we need to know who the driver is and where he is going!”

“All right!”

Bob threw the mobile phone on the passenger seat, steered his Beetle to the side of the road and switched off the engine and lights.

Jupiter was right. After only a minute, the beams of two headlights felt their way down the hill and a black Honda crossed the intersection.

Bob knew that his Beetle was not the most suitable vehicle for a pursuit. The old diesel engine rumbled in such an unmistakable way that people on the road sometimes even turned to look at it. In addition, the round headlights with their yellowish light could be immediately distinguished from the headlights of other cars in the dark. Therefore, he gave the Honda a little head start before following it. Fortunately, this road, which meandered through the lonely canyon landscape in Rocky Beach’s hinterland, was not very busy at this time of day.

After three kilometres, the driver turned into the road to Woodland Hills. Here the traffic was a little heavier. The red tail lights appeared and disappeared, appeared, disappeared—and stayed disappeared. The canyon opened up and the plain of Woodland Hills emerged.

At the next intersection, Bob stopped and looked left and right. No tail light to be seen. Had the car gained so much ground that it was already out of sight?

There was a petrol station next to the intersection. Bob steered his Beetle into the petrol station and reached for his mobile phone to report back to Jupiter. Then his eyes fell on a motel on the hillside. Bob had just driven past it, but hadn’t paid it any attention. Had the Honda perhaps went in there?

"It's worth a try," Bob muttered. He threw the mobile phone back on the passenger seat, got out and walked the short distance to the motel.

It bore a simple name—"Sleep Inn". The registration desk was in a small cottage on the street. Behind it was a two-storey L-shaped building with the motel rooms. The guests' vehicles were parked in a dimly lit car park. There were about half a dozen cars, but no black Honda. There seemed to be another parking area behind the building. Was the car perhaps parked there?

Bob crossed halfway across the car park when suddenly it became glaringly bright around him. Glaring floodlights illuminated the car park.

"Freeze!" someone shouted angrily. "One more step and I'll shoot!"

Bob reflexively raised his hands, turned at the strange voice and squinted against the floodlight.

A short stocky man with a thick full beard had stepped out of the reception. Was he actually carrying a rifle?

"What are you doing here?" the man barked.

"I'm... looking for something," Bob answered hesitantly.

"Look somewhere else!" the man yelled back.

"But I—"

"I told you to get lost, boy! This is private property—for guests only, understand? You have absolutely no business here!"

The man was so loud that a door opened on the upper floor. A beefy guy limped out of his room onto the exterior corridor and looked down suspiciously at the scene. "You've got trouble, Joe?"

"No really, Mr Unterthal. It's just some brat who thinks there's something to get here! Always the same!"

"Do you want me to come down?" the man growled and was already halfway on his way. Other doors opened as well.

"No need," Joe assured them, trying to reassure his guests. "You can go back to your room, Mrs Berger. It's just a little incident."

"I'm going now!" Bob assured them and started walking.

Joe remained where he was until Bob had stepped out of the light of the motel onto the dark street and out of sight.

After Pete had scanned the ground at the edge of the forest several times without finding anything significant, he gave up his search and went to the house. There he met Jupiter. There was no sign of Julia.

"You're all right," the First Investigator said with relief. "I heard fighting noises."

"I fought too—against that dog. You won't believe what I saw, Jupe! The—"

The front door opened with a squeak. Julia peered out hesitantly. Her eyes widened in fear. "Jupiter? Pete? Where's Growler?"

Then the Newfoundland came dashing out of the forest. With one leap, he was on the verandah and proudly spat the stick at Pete's feet.

"No playing now!" said Pete sternly. "In you go."

Surprisingly, Growler obeyed and trotted into the house with his head down.

Julia peered anxiously over Pete's shoulder towards the edge of the forest. "Is he gone?"

"He fled in a car," Jupiter reported.

"No, I mean the skull. Is it still there?"

"What kind of skull?" asked Jupiter. "What actually happened, Julia?"

"Come in," urged their client, only relaxing a little after she had closed the door behind Pete and Jupiter. "I was tidying up a bit when the dog suddenly ran to the door. I suspected someone was prowling around out there and called you guys. It can be scary at night up here on the hill with nothing but trees all around."

"While I was waiting for you, I looked out of the window. Suddenly a strange light appeared at the edge of the forest. I took Growler by the leash and went outside. I ventured a short distance away from the house until I could make out the source of the light. Standing on a tree stump was... this... this thing! And its eyes were shining!" Julia turned her head away as if she could still see the skull in front of her. "It was horrible!"

"Did you shout?" Jupiter asked. "We were just on our way to you and heard you."

She nodded. "I turned on my heel and locked myself in the house. Growler was getting more and more restless, though. Finally, I opened the door and let the dog out, thinking maybe he'd chase away the guy who put the skull there."

Pete shook his head. "He just wanted to fetch sticks." The Second Investigator briefly described what had happened. However, he concealed the fact that the skull had moved from one place to another as if by magic for the time being, because he didn't want to scare Julia anymore.

"Strange," Jupiter muttered and began to pinch his lower lip. "Was it the same skull? Did the thief bring it back? But why would he do that?"

"You think that's strange?" asked Julia. "The eyes of that thing were glowing."

"That will have been some trick."

Julia did not look convinced. "I don't know, Jupiter. There was something about that skull... I can't describe it. It worried me deeply. Actually, I'm not a fearful person, but those glowing eyes... They have..." Julia broke off.

"What's wrong with them?" Jupiter enquired. "You can speak openly with us."

"I can't really explain it," Julia murmured sheepishly. "It triggered a... a panic in me such as I have never experienced before."

The First Investigator remembered Julia's expression when she had opened the front door and knew that she was not exaggerating. "I offer you a suggestion, Julia. If it is okay with you, we'll stay here tonight. If the stranger returns again, you won't be alone."

Julia was relieved. "That's very nice of you. You can sleep in the library, there is the most space. There are a few mattresses and woollen blankets in the storeroom."

Just then, the familiar sound of Bob's Beetle approached. Shortly afterwards, Bob was standing in the doorway. Quickly, The Three Investigators brought each other up to speed.

"I'm going to sleep," Julia then announced. "This whole day has been tremendously exhausting."

She showed them the bathroom and then withdrew.

"Finally," Pete whispered when they were alone in the library. "I've been wanting to tell you something all this time, but I didn't want Julia to know. There's more happening out there at the edge of the forest."

The Second Investigator reported what he had observed. "I know you don't want to hear about this, Jupe, but the skull was conjured from one place to another. It was beamed away!"

"You have undoubtedly made a puzzling observation," Jupiter admitted. "Nevertheless, I am certain that the skull was not beamed."

"Well, I thought because of the aliens."

"Pete, that's just a ridiculous legend. The perpetrator probably just put the skull somewhere else. It was dark, after all."

"The same second the skull disappeared in one place, it reappeared twenty metres away! How could a person have moved it so quickly?"

"I don't know," Jupiter confessed. "Perhaps it's some trick."

"—Which you can't explain to me," Pete held firm, crossing his arms.

Silently, The Three Investigators put the mattresses on the floor and set up camp for the night. The library was only lit by a brass lamp with a green glass shade, which was on the small desk in the corner. On it stood an old typewriter with a blank sheet of paper clamped in it.

Jupiter walked slowly through the room and looked at the framed photos on the walls. In some of the photos he recognized Julia Scott as a little girl, holding her grandfather's hand. Then he turned his attention to the display case with the old figurines where Julia had hastily put back. The First Investigator took the time to rearrange a few pieces. As he did so, something caught his eye.

"Magnetic toys," he muttered. "There's little Hunter Scott couldn't get excited about."

He looked closely at little pendulums that rotated around each other continuously thanks to a battery-powered electromagnetic field; a picture of iron dust arranged behind glass along a magnetic field; funny plastic dogs that always turned their backsides to each other when they were moved because of built-in magnets.

Pete had made himself comfortable on a mattress and folded his arms behind his head. He was sulking because Jupiter did not take what he had seen seriously.

Bob looked at his mobile phone. "Aha! I knew it. I had read something about glowing eyes this afternoon when I was checking on crystal skulls."

Jupiter listened up. "Really?"

"Yes. I had initially dismissed it as important and didn't bother with it any further. It says here that skulls have been found whose crystal cut is such that they function similarly to a prism. Light hitting the skull from behind shines back out of the eye sockets. The seven Yucatán skulls, for example, have this special property."

"Fascinating," Jupiter thought. "Was it like that with the skull in the forest, Pete?"

"I don't know," Pete replied. "I didn't get close enough. It was beamed away after all."

Jupiter sighed. "We have to shed light on this case... if it's only to free you from this misconception. Fortunately, some things already seem quite clear."

"What, pray tell?" Pete wanted to know.

"For example, the appearance of the skull in the forest. In my eyes, that was a very classic manoeuvre to intimidate Julia. The perpetrator prepared the skull so that it glowed and then put it in a place where Julia could see it from the house. It worked. For some reason, Julia was terrified of the sight... but this is where it gets puzzling. Julia's fear seems a little... unnatural."

"You mean she's exaggerating?" asked Bob. "And hiding something from us?"

"Not exactly... I think she's being honest with us and doesn't know herself exactly why she panicked, but she's more scared of the skull than you'd expect... and the perpetrator seems to know that."

"That means she knows the perpetrator?" Bob pondered.

"Possibly."

"—Or the perpetrator was an alien who could read her mind," Pete said. He wasn't serious, he just wanted to tease Jupiter a little.

That also worked promptly. "Now cut it out, Pete!"

"I'll stop doing that if you give me an answer. How could the skull be beamed from one place to another?"

Jupiter shook his head gruffly, and he didn't have an answer... and Pete knew if Jupiter Jones didn't have an answer, the matter was serious.

## 5. The Man in White

The next morning, Jupiter was woken up by a wonderful smell. Bob and Pete were still fast asleep. The First Investigator rolled off his mattress and went into the kitchen. There Julia was standing at the cooker making pancakes. Growler, who was dozing in a sunny square on the stone floor, lifted his head lazily.

“Good morning!” Julia greeted the First Investigator in a good mood. There was no sign of the fear and exhaustion from the previous evening. “Slept well?”

“Excellent, but Bob and Pete are not awake yet.”

“You are welcome to take a shower if you like. There are towels for you in the bathroom.”

Jupiter gladly accepted the offer. When he left the bathroom, he felt awake and fresh. Julia was sitting at the kitchen table working on her laptop. She had put a plate of pancakes with maple syrup on the table for him. Next to it was a small silver case.

“This is for you,” Julia explained. “For your business cards. I found it in my grandfather’s things. It’s a little compensation for taking the case.”

“Thank you,” Jupiter said in surprise and immediately put in the business cards he usually carried in his back pocket and which were always crumpled because of that. They fitted perfectly.

“We talked about the case for a while yesterday,” Jupe continued. “It occurred to us that maybe the events of last night were just to scare you. Do you know anyone who might want to frighten you or perhaps drive you away from here?”

Julia seemed amused. “You mean, do I have enemies? I have a poorly run flower business in San Francisco and lead a perfectly normal life, Jupiter. I really don’t see who would have anything against me.”

“Have you given any more thought to how you knew the man in the leather jacket?”

“I have. I’ve come to think that I’ve never seen him myself. He just reminds me of someone—like he’s the brother of someone I know... but I can’t figure it out. Either way, I can’t think of anyone who would want me to leave.”

“Anyway, it doesn’t matter now as I have decided to sell this house, even if it breaks my heart. Somehow, it feels like my grandfather is still here in this house. In fact, I like being here. Once the house is sold, he will have left this world for good. Anyway, there’s no other way. I need this cash injection for my business.”

She sighed and turned the laptop in Jupiter’s direction. “I’m preparing the property ad. A few days ago, I took photos of this house. When the sun rises, it bathes the roof and the clock tower in wonderful light, while the rest of the house is still in the shadows of the forest.”

“Nice,” Jupiter murmured, chewing as he looked at the photos. At a close-up of the tower, where the clock showed a quarter past eleven, he paused. Before he could ask Julia about it, Growler raised his head, put up his ears and barked joyfully.

Through the window, Jupiter saw a black SUV pull up in front of the house. A woman got out. She was about in her mid-fifties and wore a colourful airy top with wide sleeves over white jeans. Her hair was wildly curled and tamed by a scarf knotted into it. Large wooden earrings dangled from her ears.

Jupiter frowned. "Why, that's Marcie Bronkowitz!"

"You know her?"

Jupiter nodded. Marcie Bronkowitz belonged to the Women's Club of Rocky Beach, a group of local ladies who organized bazaars, exchanged recipes, and enjoyed gossips. Pete's mother sometimes went there, while Aunt Mathilda contributed a cherry pie for a charity event now and then.

"Marcie checked on my grandfather regularly over the last few years after I moved away. She was also with him when he died in hospital. Today she was going to stop by for coffee. Maybe she'll take some more of Grandpa's things with her."

They went outside to greet Marcie.

Growler jumped off the verandah and rushed towards the lady before Julia could reach for his collar. However, the expected frontal attack failed to materialize. Mrs Bronkowitz laughed and raised an index finger. Growler obediently stood still and got a treat for it.

"Hello, Julia!" Mrs Bronkowitz called out in a good-humoured manner and came closer. "And you are Mathilda Jones's nephew, aren't you?"

"Jupiter," confirmed the First Investigator.

"He is helping me clean out the house," Julia explained, "along with his friends. Why don't you come in?"

Then Growler raised his head again. Another car rolled down the driveway—a shiny white Tesla. The electric car's engine was almost silent.

"Are you expecting someone else?" asked Jupiter.

Julia shook her head in confusion.

A gentleman in a snow-white, impeccably fitting suit got out of the car. He was also in his fifties. His full dark hair was slightly greying at the temples. His feet were in white loafers without socks. He wore metal and leather bracelets on his right wrist.

Marcie Bronkowitz stared at him and whispered: "But that's—"

"A very good morning to you!" the man said with a smile, exposing gleaming white teeth. "I'm sorry to disturb you so early. My name is—"

"Raphael Luca!" Marcie Bronkowitz called out.

"Oh, I'm honoured," Mr Luca asserted.

Jupiter immediately had a bad feeling about him. Mr Luca struck him as a slick businessman, complete with a fake smile and fake friendliness. Growler seemed to agree with Jupiter. The Newfoundland growled softly.

"I know you from TV!" continued Marcie, explaining to Julia, "Mr Luca hosts *The X Phenomena*, and he's also on *Dawning TV* every now and then, presenting his products."

"*Dawning TV*?" asked Jupiter. "That esoteric sales channel where you can call and have your horoscope read for twenty dollars?"

"We provide divination services," Mr Luca explained with a smile. "That has its price."

"Sure," the First Investigator said dismissively and crossed his arms. He detested this kind of money-making.

"At *Dawning TV* they also sell very interesting things," Marcie Bronkowitz tried to save the mood. "I once ordered a copper pyramid for my cacti at home. Since then, my Polaskia has already flowered twice!"

"It probably would have flowered by itself," Jupiter murmured just loud enough for Raphael Luca to hear.

"I'm Julia Scott," Julia said and stepped towards the visitor. Growler growled louder. "What brings you here, Mr Luca?"

“Pleased to meet you, Miss Scott. I am an old friend of your grandfather. I found out about his death a few days ago through the household clearance ad... Sad, really sad. My condolences.”

“Thank you. What can I do for you?”

“It’s not usually my style to jump right in, but I came here to ask you if you have any plans for this property yet.”

“Well, I have to get rid of all the stuff in there first... and quickly, because I want to get back to San Francisco as soon as possible.”

“And the house itself?”

“I will sell it.”

“It’s probably too lonely for you, isn’t it? I imagine it’s scary at night here on the hill, far away from the nearest neighbour.”

Julia frowned. “No, not really. I like being here, but I just can’t afford it.”

“Well, I’ll be very direct, Miss Scott. I’m very interested in the property.” Luca showed his brightest toothpaste smile.

Julia’s eyes widened. “Are you sure? The house is in complete shambles! I know it’s not very clever to bring that up to you, but I can’t sugar-coat things. The house is in the worst possible condition. It would have to be renovated from top to bottom. If you’re really interested, that should be clear to you.”

Raphael Luca nodded. “I am well aware of that, but this is a magical place, you know.” He closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath of air through his nose.

Julia and Jupiter exchanged glances.

“Lone Oak Hill has a strong cosmic energy,” Raphael continued. “I can sense that. I would like to use it for my spiritual work.”

Marcie Bronkowitz also took a deep breath. “Yes, really. Now that you mention it. How exciting!”

Jupiter rolled his eyes. “How much would this powerful cosmic energy be worth to you?” He left no doubt that he thought everything Luca had just said was humbug.

Mr Luca merely gave him a quick sideways glance before turning to Julia and naming a sum that left the lady of the house momentarily speechless.

“Really? Are you sure? That’s a bit quick. I mean...”

Raphael Luca smiled amusedly. “I thought it would suit you because you want to go back to San Francisco. I know that your grandfather collected a lot of things. I’m offering to buy the whole house and everything inside so you wouldn’t even have to clear out the house. What do you say?” He held out his hand to her.

Jupiter’s gaze fell on the bracelets on Luca’s wrist. A silver pendant in the shape of a half moon dangled from one.

“If you want to buy the house with everything in it, you should know that many things are no longer here,” the First Investigator said before Julia could chime in.

“Oh yeah?” asked Luca, irritated.

“Yes,” Jupe continued. “I’m telling you this because otherwise it would be unfair... My uncle bought many things, even before the household clearance. He has a salvage yard.”

Julia was briefly surprised, but quickly added: “Yes, you’re right, Jupiter.”

“What did your uncle buy?”

“Oh, so this and that... armchairs... and butterflies, a bathtub, a ‘glass head’... but the coolest thing is the knight statue. It’s standing by the road with us now.”

Jupiter had been watching Mr Luca closely. Had his eyes widened briefly at the mention of the ‘glass head’?

“Where is your uncle’s salvage yard?” Mr Luca asked.

“The Jones Salvage Yard in Rocky Beach.”

“Interesting.” Luca glanced at his gold watch. “Well, I have another appointment and I have to hurry. I’m sure you’d like some time to think it over, wouldn’t you, Miss Scott? Think it over carefully. I’ll drop in again. Goodbye!”

He held out his hand to her, nodded to Marcie Bronkowitz, ignored Jupiter and got into his Tesla. Shortly afterwards, the car purred almost silently off the lot.

Marcie Bronkowitz sighed with emotion. “How did I not know that Mr Scott was friends with Raphael Luca?”

“—Because it might not be true,” Jupiter said.

Marcie Bronkowitz didn’t seem to have heard him. “Isn’t he adorable?”

“Well,” Julia murmured. “I thought he was rather bizarre. How quickly he got down to business! In fact, his offer is tempting. Do you think there’s more to it, Jupiter? Because of that story you made up about your uncle?”

The First Investigator nodded. “Thank you for playing along. Mr Luca wore a crescent moon pendant on his wrist. The young man who asked about the crystal skull yesterday wore something very similar around his neck—and white clothes as well. Maybe the two belong together. That’s why I took the liberty of putting a lure in front of Mr Luca. Just a moment!” Jupiter pulled his mobile phone out of his pocket and called home. “Good morning, Aunt Mathilda.”

“Jupe! Good of you to call. So, this Archie with his roller skates—he keeps rolling onto the road by himself. It’s too windy today. You have to—”

“I’ll take care of it,” Jupiter promised. “Can you do me a favour quickly? In the corner with all the junk, you know, by the umbrella stands and the broken record player, there’s a glass mannequin head on a shelf.”

“You mean that awful thing that’s all dusted off because nobody wanted to buy it since the beginning of time?”

“That’s it. Could you put it with the new stuff from Hunter Scott’s house that we unloaded yesterday?”

“Jupe, why on earth would I do that?”

“I could explain it to you, but it would be far too complicated. Anyway, it has to be done right now. When a gentleman in a white suit shows up and asks for it, just say that the thing just came in yesterday. Will you do it for me? Please?”

“What more?”

“Nothing more.”

Mathilda Jones heaved a deep sigh. “Jupe, I worry about you sometimes.”

“There is no need for that, Aunt Mathilda.”

“All right, for your sake...” Aunt Mathilda agreed, “but then you do me a favour too.”

“Anything you want.”

“I surprisingly got an appointment at the dentist and the hairdresser—this afternoon, so you’d have to take over the salvage yard.”

That was a hefty consideration, but Jupiter had no time for discussion. “All right,” he said grudgingly.

“And take care of Archie before that thing causes a car accident.”

“Yes, I will.” Jupiter hung up. “I have to leave right away, Miss Scott. Will you let Bob and Pete know? And please tell Bob that I borrowed his car!”

He hurried to the yellow Beetle. The car was unlocked and the key was jammed behind the sun visor. The First Investigator jumped in, started the engine and gave chase.



## 6. Cosmic Energies

The yellow Beetle disappeared behind the trees just as Bob and Pete stepped onto the verandah, freshly showered and dressed.

“Oh, good morning, Mrs Bronkowitz!” said the Second Investigator in surprise.

Growler rushed towards him, but Marcie Bronkowitz admonished him with a raised index finger and Growler obeyed. “Hello, Pete.”

“Did Jupe take my car?” asked Bob, perplexed. “What’s going on here?”

“I’d be interested to know that too,” Marcie said. “Jupiter was acting so mysterious. You boys are investigators, aren’t you? Is Mr Luca involved in some criminal activity?”

“That remains to be seen. We had a little incident here yesterday.” Julia explained first to Mrs Bronkowitz and then to Pete and Bob what had happened.

“How exciting,” Marcie Bronkowitz remarked, “but I can’t imagine Mr Luca having anything to do with that burglar from yesterday. Burglary and theft—he has no need for such things.”

“Apparently not, if he can afford to buy the whole house outright,” Bob said.

“Because of the cosmic energies,” Mrs Bronkowitz explained knowingly, looking at the house as if wondering why she had never noticed this energy before. “Well, Mr Luca really seems to have enough money. I mean, who drives an electric car like that. Just think of the electricity bill! Are you going to sell him the house, Julia?”

Julia shrugged her shoulders. “I’m afraid I have no choice. I have to save my shop.”

“Well, I’d have been surprised if Mr Scott had any secret riches,” Marcie said. “I suppose there was nothing in the envelope? Money, I mean.”

Julia frowned. “What envelope?”

“Well, the one that had your name on it. In the library. I suppose it was a letter. I didn’t look inside, of course.”

“There was an envelope in the library? Where specifically?”

“On Mr Scott’s desk... at his typewriter.”

“When did you see it?”

“The last time I was here.”

Julia turned to Bob and Pete. “Have you seen a letter?”

The two shook their heads.

“Let’s have a look.” Julia led them towards the front door.

“Well, what’s wrong with the door?” Mrs Bronkowitz pointed to the broken lock. “The last time I was here, it was working fine.”

“When I came back here a few days ago, the front door was already broken,” Julia explained. “Anyway, the house is just falling apart. You can almost see it collapsing.”

They went upstairs.

“Another broken door!” remarked Marcie Bronkowitz as they stood outside the library.

“It’s a long story,” Julia Scott said and let Marcie enter. Julia, however, remained at the doorway of the library. Absent-mindedly, she let her bunch of keys circle around her finger.

In the library, Marcie Bronkowitz wrinkled her nose at the mattresses and blankets on the floor. It didn’t smell very fresh either.

Pete quickly opened a window and then examined the desk. There was no letter there, not even in the only drawer, just a stack of unused envelopes, a metal box with stamps, another with paper clips, a few pens and a collection of old-fashioned typewriter ribbons.

"It was lying right there," Marcie Bronkowitz said. "I'm sure of it. Strange. Was there a full moon in between? No, was there? Just today."

Julia frowned. "What does the full moon have to do with the letter?"

Bob and Pete also looked at each other questioningly.

"Oh, nothing really." Marcie Bronkowitz waved it off with a laugh. "I just thought because... because it's weird sometimes with the moon and the library and stuff."

"What's weird?"

"Oh, nothing," she repeated, "I shouldn't have mentioned it."

"Come on, Marcie."

"Well, I sometimes had the impression that strange things go on in this room when the moon is full."

"What kind of things?"

"Well, your grandfather sometimes had certain... 'moon walks', I'd like to call it." She looked at Julia uncertainly. "I hope you don't hold that against me."

"My grandfather was a weirdo, Marcie," Julia said. "Do you think that's news to me? I still don't know what you mean by 'moon walks'."

"All right." Mrs Bronkowitz's voice lowered conspiratorially. Bob and Pete realized that in truth she was not being coy at all, but eager to come out with her story.

"There was this evening," Marcie continued. "It was a year or two ago. I was on my way home when I realized I had forgotten my bag. So I turned back, and entered the house as I had a key. Inside, I called out to Mr Scott so he wouldn't be frightened, but he didn't answer. I was immediately worried. At that old age, you never know. So I looked in every room, but he wasn't in the house. I looked everywhere, but couldn't find him. I even went outside and searched the entire edge of the forest. When I returned to the house to call the police, suddenly the door to the library opened and Mr Scott looked down at me from the top of the stairs."

"So he was in the house after all. What did he say?" Pete wanted to know.

"He grinned at me cheekily and wanted to know if I had forgotten something again. 'Where on earth have you been?' I asked, and he replied: 'Well, here. I was just here.' Then he pointed to the window and said: 'Look! It's a full moon. On full moon nights, I sometimes disappear. Didn't you know that?'"

Suddenly Marcie Bronkowitz slapped her hands over her mouth. "Cosmic energies! What if your grandfather felt them too, Julia?"

"He sensed cosmic energies—and disappeared?" asked Julia. "Please, Marcie."

"I'm just saying. Even today, we don't really know what's going on in this cosmos."

"That's nonsense," Julia said straightforwardly.

"Maybe Hunter Scott was beamed away," Pete whispered so softly that only Bob could hear.

Bob shook his head unwillingly. "Isn't it conceivable that Mr Scott simply hid in the library? Behind the curtain or something?"

"Why would he do that?" Marcie Bronkowitz said firmly. "I don't know what happened here, but I couldn't get that full moon thing out of my head."

"A month later, I stayed extra late in the evening. I went to take Mr Scott a cup of tea here in the library. He'd actually locked himself in! Can you believe it? When he finally responded to my knocking, he said he didn't want to be disturbed. I tried to talk him out of

this childishness. ‘If anything happens to you,’ I said: ‘no one will know where you are,’ but he wouldn’t hear any more of it.”

“Strange,” Julia murmured, letting the key bob on her index finger.

“So I thought maybe the letter has also disappeared—just like Mr Scott did back then. It must have something to do with these energies! If Raphael Luca wants to buy the whole house because of that—”

Bob cleared his throat. “When exactly did you see the letter, Mrs Bronkowitz?”

She thought about it for a moment. “Two days after Mr Scott’s death I went to get my things that were still here. I tidied up a bit and discovered the letter. Then I closed the windows and doors and left. By the way, the front door was still intact, I’m sure of it!”

“And when did you get back from your friend’s wedding in Florida?” Bob wanted to know from Julia.

“Two days later, and by then the door lock was already broken.”

“Maybe we should take a closer look,” suggested the Second Investigator.

Together they went back downstairs.

Pete, who knew about door locks, didn’t take long to spot the tell-tale marks on the wooden frame. “The lock has been broken by force,” he said grimly.

Bob nodded. “So someone stole the letter then.”

## 7. Mr Meyer Nags Around

When Jupiter turned into Sunrise Road, the white Tesla was already at the gates of the salvage yard. Jupiter parked a little distance away and covered the last stretch on foot.

The wooden fence that surrounded the salvage yard was colourfully painted on the outside. One of the pictures depicted a sea scene with a fish looking out of the water. The eye of this fish was actually a knothole. Jupiter stuck his finger in and triggered a mechanism that opened a secret door in the fence. This was the so-called Green Gate One that The Three Investigators had created for them to enter or leave the salvage yard unseen.

The First Investigator slipped through the secret entrance and closed it quietly. He now stood in his outdoor workshop, which is partially hidden from the rest of the salvage yard by kitchen furniture. Jupe peered cautiously around a cupboard out to the yard and watched anxiously as Aunt Mathilda, accompanied by Raphael Luca, was just passing the second-hand bicycles on her way to the new items.

There, Luca rummaged through Hunter Scott's things and quickly spotted the glass mannequin head. He took it in his hand, shook his head and put it back. Then he thanked Aunt Mathilda and made his way out of the salvage yard.

When Jupiter crept out to the yard to follow Luca, he was unfortunately caught by his aunt. "Jupe! That was quick. That gentleman actually came. He just went out the gate."

"I know," Jupiter murmured and put his finger to his lips.

Mathilda Jones sighed. "Let me guess. A new case. There's a pirate treasure hidden in this junk your uncle bought." She shook her head. "Listen, if you're here already, before my dentist appointment I could... Jupe!"

The First Investigator had simply left his aunt standing there. "I can't now," he hissed back over his shoulder and hurried to Green Gate One. There he peered out of the opening. Luca was just getting into the Tesla. Jupiter waited until the car had passed, then he climbed through the fence, ran to Bob's car and gave chase.

Luca drove along the coastal road and soon he turned inland at Santa Monica. The traffic was heavy. Jupiter feared a few times that he had lost sight of the car, but fortunately it reappeared each time.

A while later at West Los Angeles, Luca turned left and headed to the Bel Air district. The road became steep and winding. In a residential neighbourhood, the Tesla finally stopped. A wrought-iron gate opened automatically, let the car through and closed again.

Jupiter stopped some distance away and went to the gate. Pressed tightly against the wall that separated the property from the street, he risked a quick glance through.

Luca had got out of the Tesla in front of a garage and was now talking to a young man who was in the process of cutting back the plants on the left and right of the driveway. Jupiter recognized him. It was the man with the shoulder-length hair and the half-moon pendant! Fortunately, the two were standing close enough for Jupiter to overhear the conversation.

"I think you were right, Anton. Julia Scott really doesn't know anything about the crystal skull, but I will find it because she's going to sell me the house. I've made her an offer she can't refuse. Unfortunately, I was misled by a fat boy who claimed that... Oh, never mind."

Luca took a deep breath. "I can hardly believe that the long wait will soon be over. Thousands of dollars I've thrown down the throat of that greedy Miss Unterthal for the other skulls. For years I've just been waiting for this last one. Hunter Scott was a stubborn son of a bitch! He just never wanted to sell, no matter how much I offered him—even when he's getting close to a hundred years old. It will finally be over soon."

"Your time has come, Raphael, I can feel it," Anton said. "Soon the seven crystal skulls will be reunited. It was worth the wait."

Luca nodded pensively. "The cosmic powers are on my side. Perhaps tonight we will experience the last incomplete full moon ceremony. You can go home now, Anton. I'll expect you punctually one hour before moonrise."

"Of course. Thank you."

Footsteps approached. Hastily, Jupiter started to retreat. He ran into the next side street. From here he watched Anton step out into the street and pass him. He had just disappeared around the next bend when Jupiter's mobile phone vibrated in his pocket. Aunt Mathilda was calling him.

"Jupiter Jones. I have to leave in half an hour at the latest. If you're not back here by then, I'll have to close the salvage yard!"

"I'm on my way, Aunt Mathilda," Jupiter assured her and hurried back to the car.

In Santa Monica, the traffic was jammed at the lights. Jupiter watched as passers-by moved faster than he did.

Suddenly, his eyes fell on the window display of a shop called 'The Doomed Dungeon'. The First Investigator knew this tourist shop. It sold mainly scary and Halloween items like costumes and masks, but also imitation props from famous horror movies—bloody knives, pentagram pendants and skulls in all sizes and colours. In the shop window, decoratively wrapped in artificial cobwebs, a skull made of glass shone. It seemed to be grinning at Jupiter.

The First Investigator glanced at his watch. He had to be at the salvage yard in just under a quarter of an hour. That was just about enough time. He put on his indicator and pulled over.

Fourteen minutes later, when Jupiter steered the Beetle into the salvage yard, the glass skull was lying next to him on the passenger seat. It had a grim face and did not look much like a real skull or the Yucatán crystal skulls from Bob's research. However, it glowed at the touch of a button and had only cost twenty-nine dollars. Jupiter hoped it would serve its purpose.

Aunt Mathilda was already waiting for him impatiently. When he got out of the car, she stood in front of him and demonstratively looked at her watch. "Just in time. You were lucky. I have to go now. Be nice to the customers! I don't want any complaints... and keep your fingers crossed that there's no drilling. I'll be back late this afternoon." She swung onto her bike and cycled out of the yard.

Jupiter had plenty to do during the afternoon. He sold a few old vinyl records, two green armchairs, a knife block and a pot set. After that, there were fewer and fewer customers in the salvage yard. This was a good opportunity to call Bob and Pete, who were still helping Julia Scott in the house.

Jupiter phoned from the yard office to keep an eye on the remaining customers. He reported his news to his two friends: "I put it together like this—Luca sent this Anton to the household clearance to buy the crystal skull from Julia, but she didn't know anything about it. She did, however, mention to Anton that she was afraid of skulls."

“Anton reported to Raphael Luca. He got the idea that the skull must be hidden somewhere in the house. He decided to buy it outright so that he could search for it at his leisure. Money doesn’t seem to be a problem for him. To make sure Julia would really sell, he staged the haunting with the skulls last night. He wanted to make sure that Julia wouldn’t want to stay there in the end.”

“But the skull was stolen,” Pete interjected.

“Yes, but Raphael Luca doesn’t know anything about that. Anton was already gone when the theft happened.”

“Right, a coherent theory,” Bob said. “By the way, I found out a bit more about this Mr Luca earlier.”

“Tell me quick!”

“He gave himself the name ‘Raphael Luca’. His real name is John Baker. He used to be an investment advisor. Then he became a real estate agent, then a fitness trainer, and then a career coach. Finally, he co-founded *Dawning TV*. From then on, things went up for him. He changed his name and wrote books with titles like *Discover Your Inner Light*, *The Ten-Point Programme of Eternal Youth* and *Lunar Energy—The Cosmic Power Centre*.”

“That fits exactly with the impression I had of him—a person with a myriad of different professions, possibly within a short time,” Jupiter said. “He only does this mystical stuff because it makes him successful, not because he’s convinced that copper pyramids make cacti bloom. He’s a charlatan who rips off people like Marcie Bronkowitz.”

“On his website he offers all kinds of courses and workshops—astrology, healing and therapy, psychic protection and the like,” Bob continued. “The prices for those are pretty steep.”

“Did it also say anything about the full moon ceremony he’s going to hold tonight?”

“No, it seems to be something exclusive.”

“This ceremony must have something to do with the crystal skulls. We should definitely be there to find out more.”

“There’s something else,” Bob said, reporting the missing letter.

“Fellas, the case is picking up speed,” Jupiter said enthusiastically. “I would love to come to you right now and look for clues, but I can’t just close the salvage yard. Aunt Mathilda would tear my head off.”

“We still need your head,” Bob said, “but we’re still busy sorting books anyway.”

“I’ll come as soon as I can.” Jupiter hung up and went out of the yard office.

Mr Meyer, the somewhat strenuous customer, had entered the yard two minutes ago and was already browsing through the new acquisitions. Something fell over with a clatter. Jupiter sighed and went outside. When the little man with the bald head and nickel glasses noticed him, he waved his walking stick.

“Good afternoon, can I help you?” Jupe asked.

Mr Meyer eyed Jupiter suspiciously over the rim of his glasses. “Do you work here?” he asked, as he almost always seemed to forget Jupiter. He had a croaky voice and a heavy German accent. “Something fell over.”

Jupiter straightened up a few sweeping brooms and meanwhile asked: “Are you interested in anything in particular?”

“The books in the box here... I can’t read the titles. Do you have to put the box on the ground? I can’t bend down that far to read the titles.”

Jupiter placed the box on one of the chairs from Hunter Scott’s estate. “Is this better?”

Mr Meyer mumbled something unintelligible, but paid no further attention to the books. Instead, he pointed to the shade of a floor lamp with his walking stick. “There’s a crack in

that.”

“You’re right about that, sir.” Aunt Mathilda’s words reverberated in Jupiter’s ear—‘I don’t want any complaints!’—and he strove to remain friendly. “It’s not a new lamp, after all. This is a salvage yard.”

“Who’s going to buy that?”

“Probably not you,” Jupiter said impatiently.

Mr Meyer turned to the old typewriters Uncle Titus had fallen so in love with. “And these are no good either.” He patted a few keys with one hand. Promptly a couple of the typebars got stuck. “You see? They need cleaning... and the rollers are completely ruined. You always have to clamp a second sheet of paper to protect the roller otherwise the letters will strike on it. You young people don’t know this anymore. You’ve ruined them!”

Jupiter took a deep breath. “I like to repeat it again, sir—this is a salvage yard. These are second-hand items here. I have never used such typewriters in my life. They belonged to an old gentleman who must have cherished them. I would estimate this to be eighty years old. The roller may not be completely intact, I think. Apart from that, it doesn’t help much if you hammer away at the keys when there is no paper at all... not to mention a second—” Jupiter fell silent in the middle of his sentence.

“Well, now you can’t think of anything else, huh?” Mr Meyer triumphed.

“You know what? You’re right.” Jupiter beamed at the man. “Our items are in an irresponsible condition. As compensation, I’ll give you a book.” Jupiter grabbed the first volume out of the box and thrust it into the bewildered gentleman’s hand. “Here you are... and if you could excuse me now...” He simply left Mr Meyer standing there and walked away.

At that moment, Aunt Mathilda cycled into the salvage yard. She had a new haircut and looked happy and relaxed. Apparently there had been no drilling. “All went well,” she said cheerfully. “What about you?”

“Eight vinyl records, the two green armchairs from last week, a knife block and a pot set,” Jupiter enumerated his sales. “I really need to go now.”

“Of course, my boy, I’m back now!”

Jupiter didn’t need to be told twice. Moments later, he was already on his way back to Lone Oak Hill.

## 8. The Typewriter Message

At Lone Oak Hill, Bob and Pete had been squatting in front of the huge shelves in the library for hours, examining every single book.

Marcie Bronkowitz had long since said goodbye. Julia had been kind enough to make them some sandwiches as lunch snacks, but she had left the library right away and was busy somewhere in the house.

Sifting through the books was more work than expected, because Hunter Scott had been interested in everything imaginable. He had owned novels from all over the world, history books, atlases, poetry books, cookbooks, picture books. By now, half of them were piled up on the floor in various categories. Bob had explained to Pete what to look for, but slowly the individual titles began to blur before Pete's eyes.

"He also had children's books—*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*," Pete said and yawned heartily.

"That's one of the books in *The Chronicles of Narnia* series," Bob remarked. "Looks like a nice old edition you have there. Put it in the collector's pile!"

The next book the Second Investigator pulled from the shelf, however, immediately woke him up. "Bob! Look! *The Mystery of the Crystal Skulls*."

Bob almost snatched it out of his hand, but was quickly disappointed. It was one of those books teeming with mysteries, hauntings and inexplicable phenomena. Bob read a few headings from the table of contents: "'Crystal Skulls—An 8000-Year-Old Secret?', 'What did the Ancient Maya know?', 'The Secret of Eternal Youth', 'Infinite Knowledge Stored in Crystal', 'Do the Skulls come from Aliens?'"

He looked at Pete. "Well, the author sure went all out on that one. Must be fun to read the book when you have all the time in the world. Look at what is advertised on the last pages—"Also published in this series: *Alien Pyramids, Lost in the Bermuda Triangle, and UFOs—They are Among Us*". Unfortunately, I can't take any of this seriously." He handed the book back to Pete.

The Second Investigator then made a discovery while turning the pages. "Hunter seems to have taken it seriously because there are notes in pencil in there."

"Is that so?" Once again Bob took the book from the Second Investigator and leafed through it himself. Someone had crossed out some passages, especially in the chapter on 'Eternal Youth'. He skimmed the relevant passages. "It says here that the crystal skulls have a healing effect. They focus cosmic energy."

"Here we go again," Pete muttered.

"Those who stay near them can be cured of diseases. Moreover, crystal skulls prolong life."

The Second Investigator raised an eyebrow. "Hunter Scott turned ninety-nine years old."

"Pete!" said Bob reproachfully. "Cosmic energy, what is that anyway?"

"Ask Marcie Bronkowitz."

Bob continued to turn the pages, but only came across one more underlining in the chapter 'What did the Ancient Maya know?' He read out: "'Even the Maya had understood

that the powers of the heavens and the stars influenced their lives. The regular crystal skull ceremonies were held at full moon to harness the rejuvenating power of the moon.””

“Full moon,” Pete repeated. “Crystal skull ceremony. Hunter Scott disappeared from his library on full moon nights... and last night, the crystal skull disappeared from the forest. What does it all mean?”

Bob shrugged his shoulders. “I have no idea.”

The familiar rattle of Bob’s Beetle made them sit up and take notice.

Pete looked out of the window. “Jupe is back.”

A little later, the First Investigator entered the library and placed his shouldered backpack on the floor. “I just had an interesting encounter.”

“And we made an interesting discovery!” Pete excitedly told the First Investigator about their find.

“A full moon ceremony with crystal skulls,” Jupiter repeated. “That must be exactly what this Raphael is up to tonight.”

“It looks like it,” Bob agreed. “According to the book we found here, such ceremonies were held to ‘harness the rejuvenating power of the moon’—whatever that is.”

“That is nonsense,” Jupe commented. “I will never understand why there are people who are willing to shell out a lot of money for such things. In the first place, why do people even believe this? Why do they even bother with something that only claims to be effective? There are no proper studies, no robust evidence, no reasonable explanation, no basis for consideration, not to mention—”

“Just let it go, Jupe,” Pete interrupted him. “That’s your view, but people have a right to believe whatever they want.”

“I just cannot stand behaviour that is contrary to common sense,” Jupe continued to rant.

“Then that’s your problem,” Pete said.

“Okay, okay, that’s enough!” Bob intervened.

Shaking his head, the First Investigator looked out of the window where the sun was already low in the sky. “Nevertheless, whatever happens tonight should be revealing.”

“By the way, what was that interesting encounter you mentioned just now?” Bob asked the First Investigator.

“It was with Mr Meyer.”

“You mean that old man that shows up at your salvage yard every day?” Bob asked.

Jupiter nodded. “After nagging a bit, he told me something about protecting typewriter rollers. Did you know that in the old days they sometimes put a second sheet behind the first one to protect the roller?”

The First Investigator walked over to Hunter Scott’s typewriter, which had a white sheet of paper clamped inside. “Like this.” He took a closer look at the sheet. “There are imprints of letters! Fellas, with any luck the letter to his granddaughter was the last thing Hunter Scott wrote.”

“You mean the characters came through?” asked Pete. “Let me see!” Gingerly, the Second Investigator turned the sheet of paper out of the typewriter and placed it on the table.

“There are actually letters,” Bob remarked. “A whole lot of characters though! Hunter Scott didn’t just write one letter with that second protective sheet behind it, but several. It’s all a mess! This isn’t going to work.”

Bob pushed the paper aside and looked in the drawer for a pencil. “If I shaded the sheet very lightly, we might be able to make out more.”

“A good thought, Bob,” praised Jupiter, “but gently, please, otherwise you won’t see anything at all.”

Bob held the pencil at an angle. Putting almost no pressure on the tip, he carefully shaded on the paper starting from the upper right corner. Where letters had been struck on by the typewriter, they now stood out clearly.

"It works!" shouted Pete enthusiastically. Now it was possible to read more. However, it did not change the jumble of letters. Only where there had been a blank line in other writing did the mess of characters clear up a little. Whenever Bob could clearly decipher a word, he called it to Jupiter, who wrote it down.

"*Lone Oak Hill*", and so on... the date at the top right was typed on more frequently. 'Dear...' He also seems to have written business letters with the machine. Now first comes a big muddle—'have'... 'want to'... 'happy'... 'my'... 'and'... 'but'... 'rite book'..."

"Have", 'want to', 'happy'?" Pete repeated. "You can't do anything with that at all... and by the way, what is a 'right book'?"

"Not 'right', but 'r-i-t-e'. I suppose it could be 'favourite book', but I only read out what can be recognized beyond doubt—'little'... 'return'... 'knew'... 'fear'... 'Yucat'..."

Jupiter listened up. "What? Really?"

"There it is!"

"Indeed."

"I'm sure he typed 'Yucatan', and the word after that... is again indecipherable."

"Wait!" cried Pete. "Here it says 'clock', doesn't it?"

"Yes, it is 'clock', " Bob confirmed, "and here 'brary'!"

"That could be 'library', " Pete exclaimed.

"Exactly," Bob agreed.

Pete looked over at the wreckage of the old grandfather clock. "'Yucatán', 'clock', 'library'—there seems to be some connection here."

"Then there is still 'terthal' here," Bob continued, and Jupiter immediately followed up.

"Wait, what does it say?"

"'Terthal'—I can't decipher the other letters."

"Could it possibly be 'Unterthal'?"

A steep wrinkle appeared on Bob's forehead. "Yes, quite possibly. Who or what is 'Unterthal'? And why does it sound so familiar?"

"The name came up today in the conversation between Luca and his assistant Anton. Luca said he had thrown thousands of dollars down the throat of the greedy Miss Unterthal for the other skulls."

Bob mused. "Unterthal... Unterthal... wait a minute! The motel!"

"The one you got in trouble with last night?"

Bob nodded excitedly. "When the owner came out and snapped at me, a few people stuck their heads out the door. Among them was a man whom Joe, the owner, addressed as Mr Unterthal. I almost forgot about that."

"That can't be a coincidence," Jupiter was convinced.

"Was that perhaps the thief?" asked Pete.

Bob shook his head. "The leather jacket guy was short and wiry, the man at Sleep Inn was a huge guy." He switched on his mobile phone and did a quick search. Fortunately, the name 'Unterthal' was very rare. "There's a jewellery shop called 'Unterthal' in Orlando, Florida."

"So?" asked Pete, unimpressed.

"They specialize in crystal jewellery." Bob skimmed the jeweller's website. "The business was founded about eighty years ago by an Alois Unterthal. Today it's run by his great-granddaughter, Gwendolyn Unterthal. Well, that's all it says."

“Crystal jewellery,” Pete murmured. “Do you think it’s connected to our case?”

“If so, we definitely still need to find out how this piece of the puzzle fits into the overall picture,” Jupiter said. “We should pay a second visit to this motel as soon as possible.”

“Right now?” asked Bob.

“I have a little something else to do.” Jupiter pretended to be mysterious. “—But I need Julia for that.”

As if waiting for her cue, footsteps sounded on the stairs and shortly afterwards, Julia was standing in the doorway to the library. She had a plate of chocolate biscuits in her hands. “Well, boys, how’s work? And how’s the investigation going?”

“We are making progress,” Jupiter replied, “but there are still a few crucial pieces of the puzzle missing.”

“Thank you for the biscuits,” Bob said.

Julia put the plate down on the desk. She was about to leave again when her eyes fell on a stack of books. *“The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe,”* she said and picked up the book. “I’d almost forgotten about that. My grandfather used to read it to me. I don’t know what I loved more—the book or the way he gave King Aslan a voice. Well, what are you up to, Jupiter?”

Jupiter had tampered with his backpack. Now he drew the curtains in front of the windows. “I’ll darken the room first,” he said.

“Whatever for?” asked Julia anxiously.

The First Investigator closed the last curtain and turned around. In his right hand he held the glass skull he had bought in the shop in Santa Monica. Thanks to a built-in LED, it glowed from the inside.

Julia gasped for air and took a few steps back. “Don’t!” she gasped. “Take it away! Please!”

Jupiter took a step towards her instead. “I want you to remember, Julia. Don’t be afraid. It’s just a piece of glass.”

“No!” Julia Scott turned and left the library in a hurry.

## 9. A Hot Lead

Startled, Bob and Pete looked at her leaving, then they turned to the First Investigator.

“Jupe! What was that all about?” Pete wanted to know. “Is that the stolen skull?”

“No. I got it from a creepy shop in Santa Monica.”

“And what did you want to achieve with this performance?” asked Bob.

“Julia Scott knows something about her grandfather’s crystal skull,” Jupiter said. “I’m pretty sure she does. She already reacted so intensely when you showed her the photos on the mobile phone yesterday, Bob... and then again that night when the glowing skull appeared at the edge of the forest.”

“You haven’t seen the glowing skull, Jupe,” Pete said. “I also had an intense reaction. It was extremely scary. In any case, why should Julia keep anything from us? After all, she hired us as investigators.”

“I don’t think she’s hiding anything, more like she’s repressing something. She is afraid of the sight of a crystal skull because it triggers something in her. I wanted to bring about that reaction again and get her to face her fear and get to the bottom of it. That’s why I bought this thing and showed it to her without warning.”

“Well, you certainly got the reaction,” Pete said sombrely, “but you overshot the mark plenty.” The Second Investigator shook his head slightly. “I’ll go check on her.” He left the library.

Bob took the skull in his hand, found the little switch for the light, and flicked it off.  
“That was really a bit too much, Jupe.”

“Yeah, maybe,” the First Investigator admitted. “I thought it would be a good idea.” He pulled back the curtains again and looked out of the window.

The house cast a long shadow that merged with the edge of the forest. “The sun will be down soon. We can’t go to the motel first and then to Luca’s full moon ceremony. There’s too little time for that. I suggest we split up. Pete and you, you go to the Sleep Inn and I’ll go to Raphael Luca’s.”

They left the library to tell Pete about their plan. He was sitting in the kitchen with Julia.

“I was just telling Julia about the protective paper in the typewriter,” Pete said.

“The few words you have deciphered don’t mean anything to me,” Julia said, “not even the name ‘Unterthal’.”

“I’m sorry I frightened you, Julia,” Jupiter said. “That was not my intention. I merely wanted to make you realize that there is nothing to be afraid of in front of a piece of glass. I had hoped that you might remember something about the crystal skull and your grandfather. I guess I went a little too far there.”

“I may have overreacted a little,” Julia admitted. “You’re right, after all. It’s just a piece of glass. I’ll think about it.”

“I’m afraid we have to leave now. There are two tracks to follow.”

“What? Now?” Julia was startled. “What if that madman from last night is hanging around again?”

“If anything seems suspicious to you, call us. Then we’ll come back as soon as possible. I promise.”

They split up. Jupiter drove Bob's Beetle one more time, while Pete and Bob took the MG.

When the two investigators reached the motel, the sun had disappeared behind the mountains. Dusk was drawing in. Pete also parked the car on the grounds of the petrol station so that they could approach the motel on foot.

"When we go in from the road, Joe will see us immediately. He has a view of the driveway from his reception. That was my undoing last time."

"Then we have to go to the back somehow." Pete looked across the grounds. The property was fenced off. Behind it, the terrain rose. The sand-coloured slope was sparsely overgrown. "We'll get over the fence somehow," Pete was convinced.

They went cross-country and circled the motel widely until they arrived at the back. In fact, they quickly found a spot where the chain-link fence was so bent that they could crawl under it. Soon they were at the back of the building.

"Look!" said Bob. "There's a black Honda!"

"And not only that... There's a red motorbike with yellow flames on the side. That's the thing the thief escaped on yesterday. So that's it! The thief of the crystal skull and the unknown man who tried to scare Julia last night work together."

"It looks like it."

"But why would you steal a crystal skull first and then go back and do that fanciful magic in the forest?"

"Pete, how would I know that?"

"It's all too complicated for me," Pete remarked. "All I know is that Jupe was right. We have a hot lead here."

The two of them crept to the car park where Bob was caught by Joe last night. They hid behind a bush.

"Hmm... Mr Unterthal lives up there," Bob said, pointing up. "Upper floor—The third door from the left. There is a bluish flicker behind the adjacent window."

"He's there watching TV," Pete remarked. "What now?"

"We're waiting. Maybe he'll leave soon for Raphael's full moon ceremony."

"Why should he?"

"I assume they are all involved in the same thing, Pete. Anyway, it's just a hunch."

The next moment, the door next to Mr Unterthal's room opened. A young woman stepped out onto the exterior corridor. Her blond hair shimmered in the light of the outside illumination. She knocked on Mr Unterthal's door, which opened shortly afterwards.

Mr Unterthal stuck his head out for a moment and talked to her. The woman nodded and left. She hurriedly ran down the stairs, got into the black Honda and drove off.

"What do we do now?" asked Pete.

"We'll look around her room, what else?"

On the way to the stairs, Bob kept looking over at the reception. Joe was nowhere to be seen. The stairs squeaked horribly, and their footsteps echoed dully on the wooden floor.

"Here we are." Outside Room 14, Pete pulled out his lock picks.

"Hurry up!" hissed Bob, listening for any sound coming from Room 13, but all he heard was the laughter of a sitcom on TV.

The lock opened with a click. "Quick! Inside!" Pete murmured. They pushed through the door and closed it. "Phew."

Bob put his finger to his lips. Again, they could clearly hear the TV sounds from the next room. "The walls are made of plywood, Pete. We better not make a sound."

Pete nodded silently, locked the door from the inside for safety's sake and looked around. They didn't need to switch on their flashlights as there were just enough light from the lamp outside filtering in through the orange curtain.

A bed, a small brown table, a chair, a wardrobe, a refrigerator and a musty carpet—that was all the motel room had to offer. Next to the bed was an open suitcase. On the desk were a few papers. Bob glanced into the adjacent tiny bathroom, from which a musty smell emanated. There were only a few cosmetic items here, nothing peculiar.

"Bob, look!" whispered Pete. Inside the opened suitcase lid was something dark and fuzzy. At first it looked like a furry animal. "A wig! And on top of it is a fake moustache! Do you know what that means?"

"The leather jacket guy! Our thief from yesterday... is a woman in disguise."

Pete stroked the wig. Something shone underneath. He picked it up and gasped in surprise. Empty glassy eye sockets stared at him darkly.

"The crystal skull!"

## 10. Just a Piece of Glass

“No. A crystal skull,” Bob corrected. “Actually, not even crystal. This thing is glass.” He lifted the skull. As he did so, a bandana that had been lying next to the wig slipped aside. Underneath, another skull emerged.

“Two, actually!” Bob looked at the skull from all sides. “Look, there are LEDs on this one too, just like the thing Jupe bought.”

Bob couldn’t find a switch, but Pete found two small and identical remote controls—each with several coloured buttons and an ‘Off’ button. It was easy to figure out what they were for—one for each of the skulls to light up with different colours. When Pete lighted up one of the skulls, it no longer had anything sinister about it, but looked like a cheap party room decoration.

“Now imagine placing these two things in a forest at night, twenty metres apart,” Bob said. “You light up one first, then you turn it off with the remote, and a second later you light up the other.” He demonstrated. “Wouldn’t it look in the darkness as if the same skull had been beamed from one place to another?”

Pete thought about it. “But then the skull that had the light turned off should still have been there.”

“Maybe it was, but it was dark...” Bob said, “and you were immediately distracted by the second skull.”

Pete thought about it for a moment. “You’re right, Bob. It really could have been just a trick.”

“So that solves that mystery,” Bob said with satisfaction. “Jupe was wrong. It wasn’t Mr Luca who put on the glowing skulls to frighten Julia Scott. It was this thief. The only question is why she did it.”

Next door, the TV was still blaring. The sitcom was over. Now there were advertisements. A bed creaked. Heavy footsteps sounded.

Pete and Bob held their breath, but Mr Unterthal only went into his bathroom. Shortly afterwards, they heard the toilet flush, then the creaking of the bed again.

“I thought he was coming over,” Pete sighed.

“We better hurry up with the rest of the room,” Bob suggested. “Let’s see what else we can find.”

The contents of the suitcase consisted mainly of clothes. On the desk, next to a kettle and small sachets of instant coffee, powdered milk and sugar, there were some papers lying around.

“Airline tickets,” the Second Investigator realized. “Orlando, Florida to Los Angeles, California... for Gwendolyn Unterthal. That’s the owner of that jewellery shop, Bob! And the guy next door? Is that her husband?”

“In a separate room? More likely her brother.”

“Gwendolyn arrived seven days ago.”

“Hmm... just like Julia,” Bob remarked. “She was in Florida for a wedding... and what do we have here?” Bob pulled out an opened envelope. On it, in greyish typewriter letters, was just one word—‘Julia’. “Pete! This is Hunter Scott’s letter!”

Carefully, Bob pulled the thin paper out of the envelope and unfolded it. "Dear Julia," Bob read out—and winced as Pete grabbed his forearm.

Outside, a car approached. Pete scurried to the window and peered past the orange curtain into the car park. "The black Honda is back!"

The car parked and Gwendolyn Unterthal got out.

"Bummer!" Bob muttered. "The letter will have to wait." He pulled his mobile phone out of his pocket and photographed the letter. Then he put the letter in the envelope and inserted it back to where he found it. "Now let's get out of here."

"Too late," Pete said. Miss Unterthal was already climbing the squeaky stairs. "We can't get out of here without her seeing us. We have to hide."

"Quick, under the bed!" Bob threw himself on the floor and crawled under the bed frame. It was so low that he scraped his back against the bed slats. The carpet under his face smelled rancid. Pete crawled next to him.

The footsteps on the corridor came closer and already a key was turning in the lock. Gwendolyn Unterthal entered her room. Bob and Pete held their breath.

The woman put a rustling bag on the bed, then went into the bathroom and washed her hands. The smell of a Chinese noodle dish spread. She returned to the bedroom and stopped in the middle of the room. Bob had turned his head. His gaze fell on her shoes, and at the artificial moustache. They had forgotten to put it back on the suitcase lid! Apparently Gwendolyn had discovered it too!

Raphael Luca's house was located a good distance from the road in the middle of a lushly planted garden on a hillside. Its white façade was glowing red in the light of the setting sun.

The First Investigator stood a distance away across the road under a tree, playing with a branch he had picked up, wondering how to get into the property. The surrounding wall was too high, as was the iron gate, to simply climb over. A metallic panel embedded in the wall suggested an intercom system, but Jupe could not just ring the bell.

A shiny vintage Mercedes approached, slowed down and stopped at the side of the road. An elderly gaunt man got out. He had stubbly grey hair and wore loose linen clothes in various shades of yellow. He rang the bell at the gate. Without anyone answering the intercom, a buzzer sounded and the gate swung open. The man entered, after which the gate swung back into the lock.

"Should it be that easy?" murmured Jupiter, but he didn't dare try it the same way.

He waited until another car parked. It was a bright red sports car. The driver wore an extra-long white jacket with a hood, which she pulled deep into her face. Only her large copper earrings peeked out from underneath. She also rang the bell at the gate.

Jupiter started to move, pretending to stare at his mobile phone and pay no further attention to his surroundings. The young woman stepped through the gate. As it slowly swung shut, Jupiter had to reduce his speed only minimally to stick the branch to prevent the gate from closing. He walked on inconspicuously, waited briefly at the next bend, returned and stealthily entered the garden. Quietly and with plenty of distance, he followed the woman.

Flickering candles stood on the ground to the left and right of a flagstone path. They led to the back of the house, where the boundaries of the property were lost in the darkness. The first stars were shining in the sky.

On a large wild lawn, about a dozen people stood in the middle of a circle of candles. Jupiter recognized Luca and Anton, both wearing white robes. Those present were talking

quietly to each other, but the First Investigator was too far away to make out what was said. He approached the circle of light from the side and lay flat on his stomach at a sufficient distance. From here, he had a good view.

Not far from the small group, a strange equipment was set up that resembled a satellite dish. It was about one metre in diameter. The inside of the dish was mirrored. In front of this structure were a metal frame and six wooden boxes.

Gradually, those present lined up in a semicircle and looked expectantly at Luca.

Raphael Luca smiled into the round and spread his arms. "I greet you! Once again we have come together to experience the magic of the crystal skulls—to receive the cosmic energy, as the ancient Maya did, and to give our impermanent bodies a piece of immortality." He raised his head and looked at the mountainside behind his property, its outline silhouetted black against the night sky.

The effect was enhanced by the full moon, which was just rising behind the hillside, bathing the garden in ever brighter silver light. Jupiter ducked lower, but fortunately none of those present paid attention to their surroundings. All eyes were directed upwards.

While the full moon took its place in the sky, large and magnificent, Luca turned his attention to the wooden boxes. He opened the first one and carefully lifted out a crystal skull with both hands. He held it out to the moon for a moment as if for a blessing. Then he carefully placed it on the metal frame, which seemed to be a holding device specially constructed for this purpose. He did the same with the other five. In the end, all six skulls were on the frame in a form of a triangle—one at the top, two in the middle, and three at the bottom.

Meanwhile, Anton had adjusted the position of the mirrored dish. Now it focused the moonlight like a concave mirror and threw it onto the back of the six skulls. The light penetrated each skull and shone out of the eyes.

It was an eerie scene. Even Jupiter, who found this whole ceremony ridiculous and couldn't take the participants seriously, found the sight... powerful. It was the first word that came to his mind, even though he probably wouldn't have said it to Pete and Bob.

Raphael Luca raised his voice: "Let's begin!" He strode past those present and looked each of them in the eye for a moment. At the woman in the hood he stopped and held out his hand as if asking her to dance. She let him lead her to the crystal skulls. There she sat down cross-legged and took off her hood. Long blonde hair was revealed underneath.

Jupiter recognized her. It was Cora Corman, the well-known pop singer who had been conquering the charts with almost every new single for some time! The focused moonlight fell on her face. Pale rainbow-coloured speckles shimmered on her skin.

Only now did Jupiter take a closer look at the other participants. Hadn't he seen the little man with the short beard in a movie before? And the older woman with the round glasses—that was the presenter Natalie Williams.

"For thousands of years, the Yucatán skulls have focused the energy of the universe!" continued Luca. "To receive it, we open our minds... and to rejuvenate ourselves, we let the moon exercise its power."

Raphael Luca put his left hand on Cora Corman's shoulder from behind. She could not see how he slowly pulled something out of the folds of his white robe with his right hand. It was a syringe. Its needle shimmered silver in the moonlight as it slowly approached Cora Corman.

## 11. Blood and Light

Jupiter widened his eyes.

None of the participants reacted and Miss Corman seemed unaware of the impending danger. The First Investigator tensed his muscles and was ready to jump up and intervene.

Finally, out of the corner of her eye, she noticed the syringe. Instead of being startled, she closed her eyes and stretched out her right arm.

Luca held her arm tightly. Now Anton stepped closer. He disinfected the crook of her arm with a swab, took the syringe, and used it to pricked her skin.

Jupiter winced inwardly. Cora Corman also flinched, but let it happen. The syringe filled with blood. The others stood rooted in their semicircle, holding hands and watching. No one spoke a word.

Finally Anton pulled the needle out of Cora Corman's arm and stuck a plaster on the small wound. Then he handed Miss Corman the syringe with her own blood. She accepted it with a smile and held it exactly at the point where the bundled light from the six skulls met. The dark red liquid shimmered. Miss Corman took a deep breath and intoned a mysterious chant, which the other participants joined in one by one. They hummed strange-sounding words that Jupiter could not recognize. The young singer's voice stood out loud and clear from the others.

After about a minute, Anton took the syringe from her again and injected the blood into her other arm. She sighed and smiled. After the second wound was also treated, the singer rose and made room for the next person in the round. It was the elderly gaunt man.

The ritual repeated itself. Jupiter shivered the second time as well when the man had his blood drawn. One after the other, all those present took their turn. The eerie chant echoed across the meadow without pause.

Last to go was Luca himself. After Anton had re-injected his blood, he stood in front of the group again. With one last verse, the chant fell silent.

For a brief moment, eerie silence spread before Luca said: "Take this cosmic gift. Let the magic of the Yucatán skulls heal you. May it give us a long life."

That was the end of it. The ritual was over. Luca put the skulls back into their boxes. The semicircle dissolved, a few candles were lit again and people began to talk quietly to each other. Jupiter picked up individual sentences.

"It's like a fountain of youth every time!"

"I am so grateful to Raphael."

"My skin has already become much firmer."

Jupiter rolled his eyes when he heard that.

Some of the participants left the circle and made their way to the gate. Others still wandered around the garden chatting. It was time for Jupiter to leave.

In a hurry, Jupiter rustled some branches and Cora Corman immediately turned around and stared. Then she signalled to another young woman and both of them headed towards where the First Investigator was. Immediately, Jupiter pressed himself as flat as possible on the ground.

However, a sharp cry tore the night apart. "Someone's here!"

Suddenly, Jupiter jumped up and ran. Shouts were heard behind him. "Damn paparazzi!"

Was someone following him? The First Investigator forgot all caution and ran across the dark lawn instead of following the lit path. When he reached the gate, the presenter Natalie Williams was on her way out. Startled, she jumped to the side. Jupiter stormed past her.

He ran to the Beetle, jumped in and drove off in a hurry. In the rearview mirror, he could see Anton just outside the gate, threatening him with his fist. Shortly, the First Investigator turned into the next bend.

While Jupiter was on his way back to Lone Oak Hill, Bob and Pete were in trouble in Room 14 of Sleep Inn. Gwendolyn had found the fake moustache on the floor. Bob saw her squat down and reach for it. If she bent over a little more, she would find the boys.

Suddenly someone banged on the wall.

"Gwen, are you back?" a voice came muffled from the next room. "I'm hungry."

"Yes, I am!" Gwendolyn rose, took the rustling bag and left the room.

Pete breathed a sigh of relief, but Bob put his finger to his lips. Quietly they crawled out from under the bed. From next door, indistinct voices came through the wall.

Pete was already at the door. He wanted to leave as quickly as possible. "Come on!" he hissed.

At that very moment, the TV next door was switched off and the words spoken in the next room were much more audible. Bob pressed his ear against the wall. Pete hesitantly did the same.

"You could have easily brought me two portions."

"Nic, be glad I thought of you at all," Gwendolyn said. "Anything else?"

"I just can't much with the condition of my leg."

"Yes, yes, your leg—the same old excuse. I have to do everything all the time, even coming here all the way from Florida because you can't even get into Scott's house."

"That was a few days after my accident, Gwen! I couldn't even walk at that point! Do you think I'm enjoying this? I would have preferred to do it myself because I can't imagine I would have acted as stupidly as you did yesterday at the house."

"Oh, thank you so much, Nic!" she retorted venomously. "You're making this seem so easy, do you realize that? You're putting it as if I'm the only one who can make a mistake."

"And what a mistake it was!" Nic snorted contemptuously. "Smashing that clock and alerting the entire house was not only a mistake, but by far the biggest stupidity ever committed by a human being."

"I panicked!" Gwen defended herself loudly. "How many times do you want me to explain to you. When they suddenly banged on the door—what was I supposed to do?"

"Slip away inconspicuously, perhaps!"

"Then Scott's granddaughter would have noticed that I had already removed the pendulum from the clock!"

"You could have put it back in."

"In the ten seconds I had left? Nic, you weren't there. You wouldn't have known what to do in my place either."

"In the first place, you shouldn't have waited for the stupid household clearance to get to the clock!"

"Shouldn't this, shouldn't that! How was I supposed to know when Julia Scott wasn't in the house? Was I supposed to lay in wait for days, perhaps? The household clearance was a

sure thing, and it would have worked if something had been hidden in the clock, but it wasn't. Is that my fault too?"

Nic mumbled something unintelligible before contritely admitting: "No. It's maddening, though. We have no idea where the damned skull is."

Bob and Pete looked at each other with wide eyes. So Gwen, the thief, had not stolen the crystal skull at all! Could it be that she had not found the thing in the clock? If so, that could mean that it was still in the house—somewhere.

"Raphael Luca paid us a lot of money for the last three skulls. Sooner or later he'll be at Hunter Scott's house buying skull number seven from that clueless woman, probably for a laughable sum. We have to beat him to it, Gwen—not just for the money. You know that if she sells him the thing and he finds out the secret of the Yucatán skulls, we're finished!"

## 12. The Search for the Crystal Skull

“What does that mean now?” murmured Pete.

Bob waved it off. He didn’t want to miss a word of what they were discussing, but at the moment, no one said anything. Nic and Gwendolyn seemed to be eating.

“So Gwen didn’t steal the skull at all,” Pete whispered. “Then that’s probably why she did all that magic last night at the edge of the forest... to get Julia to hand it over willingly... or what?”

“Pete, I don’t know!” hissed Bob, annoyed.

“Jupe needs to know about this,” the Second Investigator muttered and pulled his mobile phone out of his pocket. He wrote a text message. When Bob looked at him questioningly, Pete showed him the display:

*The crystal skull is still in the house!*

Then Pete sent the message.

“This stuff tastes like nothing,” growled Nic Unterthal on the other side of the wall.

“When are you going to get on with your crazy plan, Gwen?”

“The plan is not crazy. It was absolutely right to scare Julia Scott, you’ll see. She will willingly sell us the crystal skull the next time we show up at her place. She’ll probably even throw in some money for us to take it away!”

“That’s assuming she knows where the thing is. When do you want to ask her?”

“As soon as those three strange fellows have gone. I don’t know them at all, but they interrupted me last night. I wonder if they’re family. Sooner or later, I hope they’ll go away.”

“My goodness, Gwen, this food really is awful! And of course there’s no salt anywhere in this damn motel room.”

“I have some,” Gwen said.

Pete and Bob exchanged horrified looks. They already heard the door of Room 13.

“Get back under the bed!” hissed Bob.

They threw themselves to the ground.

“But if she’s gone again, we’re out of here!” hissed Pete.

“Shh!”

Gwendolyn entered the room. She rummaged around in the little bags on the desk. “Oh, damn, it’s only sugar,” she muttered and was halfway out when a message came through on Pete’s mobile phone with a melodic ring.

Jupiter had just reached Hunter Scott’s house on Lone Oak Hill when he received a text message from Pete. “Strange,” he muttered when he read the message which said:

*The crystal skull is still in the house!*

What did that mean? Jupiter was tempted to call Pete, but he surely had a reason to tell him this news by text, so he wrote back:

*Are you sure? Where? I'm back at the house. When are you coming?*

He sent the message and walked to the front door. The full moon bathed the forest and the house in an unreal light—almost like a black-and-white movie, broken only by the warm yellow behind the kitchen window.

Julia was sitting in the kitchen with a cup of tea and was on her laptop checking the photos she took of the house, as she had been doing in the morning. When Jupiter entered, she pushed the laptop aside and looked expectantly at the First Investigator. “Well?”

“Raphael Luca has built up a very exclusive circle of wealthy customers there.” Jupiter recounted his experience on Luca’s property. “The rich and beautiful of Hollywood are willing to diminish their wealth in order to maintain their beauty. Imagine doing this for firmer skin and eternal youth! I don’t even want to know how much he swindles out of those people month after month for a peek at his crystal skull collection.

“The guests are handpicked. Cora Corman probably has a few million dollars in her bank account. However, she probably wouldn’t like it if it came out that she was spending her fortune on such obscure practices. When she entered the property, she had her hood pulled down over her face. When she spotted me, she thought I was a paparazzo. Luckily I managed to escape.”

“Oh, you’re really getting worked up about this, aren’t you?” Julia remarked.

“I just can’t understand why people keep falling for such charlatans.”

“It’s up to them what they spend their money on,” Julia continued, “and it doesn’t affect poor people.”

“But as someone who considers common sense the most valuable thing we possess, I find it hard to accept.” Jupiter shook his head. “Enough of that. Let’s deal with problems that we can solve with our minds. First and foremost, where is the crystal skull?”

Julia frowned. “Well, the thief has it.”

“Apparently not.” Jupiter showed her Pete’s message. “Unfortunately, Pete hasn’t got back in touch yet. So I don’t know what his claim that the skull is somewhere in the house is about. They must have found out something that is beyond my knowledge. So if we assume it’s true, then the thief didn’t find anything in your grandfather’s clock.”

“But we saw the skull,” Julia interjected. “The thief had it in his hand.”

“Did we really? It could have been made of glass like the one I bought this afternoon. The thief could have planned to exchange the real one for the fake one. However, we didn’t find anything in the clock, so it is possible that the real skull is still somewhere in the house.”

“An eerie notion.” Julia shuddered involuntarily.

“We have to find it.”

“But how? Where do you want to start looking?”

“In the library. The missing letter, of which we were able to reconstruct a few fragments, points to this, as does Marcie Bronkowitz’s account of your grandfather’s strange behaviour. We’ll find answers in the library. I’m sure of it.”

Julia put her laptop into sleep mode and was about to get up when Jupiter suddenly remembered something he had wanted to ask her that morning. Raphael Luca’s unexpected appearance had distracted him from it. “Before we go to the library, may I have another look at the photos you took of the house?”

Julia frowned irritably. “Yes, of course.”

Jupiter pulled the laptop towards him and clicked through the photos. “There! The date of this photo shows that you took it three days ago and the clock at the tower shows a quarter

past eleven. When we first saw the clock yesterday, it was showing half past five, and it is still the same now. This means that it had stopped.”

“I suppose it stopped some time after I took this photo,” Julia surmised.

“Exactly,” Jupe agreed. “I had thought that such clocks run on mains electricity. If there is a power trip, the clock would stop, but when power comes back, the clock resumes running—although it would show a wrong time. I suspect that this particular clock runs on battery, so the question is who had been changing the battery in the past? Your grandfather? I didn’t see any trap door or anything like that through which you could enter the clock tower from the house. Did he climb up there with a ladder? At his age?”

A steep wrinkle appeared on Julia’s forehead. “I never thought about it, but I know the clock was working properly when I last visited my grandfather. He must have taken care of it—you’re absolutely right, but certainly not by climbing up there with a ladder though. I don’t think he could do that at his age.”

“The thief smashed the grandfather clock because he was looking for something. He must have had a clue that something was hidden in the grandfather clock. It could also be a wrong interpretation. Maybe it wasn’t the grandfather clock that was meant, but the clock in the tower. If my spatial imagination doesn’t deceive me, it’s right above the library, isn’t it?”

“That should be right.”

Jupiter rose from the table. “Shall we go and see?”

Julia nodded and followed him upstairs. There was no light in the library. Three rectangles of moonlight fell on the debris of the grandfather clock, the wall of books and the desk on which the twenty-nine-dollar glass skull stood. Jupiter noticed Julia’s hesitation again. She was standing in the doorway, playing with her key.

“Something else points to the library as a place for answers,” Jupiter said, “and that is you, Julia. You don’t like this room, and you are afraid of the crystal skull. A fear beyond the expected, if you’ll allow me that remark.”

“Yes,” Julia said in a strained voice. She looked into the room as if some unknown terror lurked there. “You’re right. I was angry with you when you shoved that glowing thing in my face earlier. After you all left, I wondered why I can’t stand the sight of that skull. I’m afraid I haven’t found an answer, but this thing triggers something in me.”

“I can only help you a little in finding out the answer. First of all, I can assure you that this piece of glass cannot harm you, and I can promise you that I will not leave you alone if you want to face your fear.”

Jupiter held out his hand to her, but that was unnecessary because Julia was already stepping into the room.

## 13. Hunter's Little Puzzle

Julia Scott stood in the middle of the room and looked around.

"Anxiety disorders can sometimes be treated with exposure therapy, which is a form of cognitive behavioural therapy," the First Investigator said calmly. "For example, if someone is afraid of spiders, you first show them pictures of spiders—then later real ones... first small ones, then bigger ones... from a distance and finally from very close up. Often it only takes a few hours until the victim loses the fear of spiders." Jupiter fell silent.

Julia had walked straight towards the glass skull. Her hand trembled as she reached out for the thing. She grabbed it, turned it, looked into its empty eye sockets and finally switched on the lights. "It's really ridiculous. The thing is terribly cheap and ugly—nothing more, but something about it... I find terrifying..." She looked over at the wall of books and narrowed her eyes. "—Like this wall."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't like the wall."

"You don't like the wall?"

"No. It always gave me the creeps. That's why I asked your uncle for someone to do the sorting of the books."

She walked towards the wall, using the glowing skull for the light. Half the books had been cleared out and were lying in piles on the floor. Thoughtfully, Julia looked at the empty shelves. At the same time, her gaze seemed to pass through them and into the indefinite distance.

"It's like in the supermarket when you know you wanted to buy something else, but you just can't figure out what it was. There's something here... but I don't know what."

Perplexed, she turned to the stacks of books and picked up an old children's book.

"*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*," Jupiter read the book's title.

"My favourite book as a child," Julia added.

"Favourite book? Just a moment." Jupiter went to the desk and picked up the sheet of paper where Bob shaded on to reveal the typewriter-struck characters. "'Favourite book', 'clock', 'library'," he muttered. "We don't know for sure, Julia, but it could be that your grandfather mentioned a 'favourite book' in his letter to you. Maybe it's your favourite book... maybe it's this book... May I see it?"

The First Investigator took the book from her hand. It was the beautiful old book that Bob told Pete to place in the collector's pile earlier. On the cover were two children riding on the back of a lion. Jupiter flipped through the pages, but neither a note fell out nor were there any markings.

Julia looked at the book and said: "The story is about a couple of kids going through an old wardrobe into a fantastic land called Narnia. That always fascinated me as a little girl—that maybe one day I could get to a wonderful place through a secret door—through a wardrobe or through..." She paused and then looked at the cupboard. "... A door," she said softly and pointed to the wall. "There should be a door here."

"Excuse me?" The First Investigator asked.

“Behind this cupboard right there. Don’t ask me how I came up with it, Jupiter, but... I walked through a door right there at some point.”

Julia closed her eyes as if trying to conjure up experiences from the past. “There’s a staircase behind the wall that leads up.”

“—To the clock tower!” Jupiter cleared the last books off the shelf at the spot Julia had pointed to.

The First Investigator tapped the back panel of the cupboard, but nothing happened. It sounded hollow everywhere, but that was probably because there was a little space left between the cupboard and the wall of the room. There was no way to quickly remove the shelves or the back panel as they were fixed tight.

“If there really is a secret door, then it must be possible to open it without taking the shelves or the cupboard apart,” Jupe surmised.

At that moment, a message came in on the First Investigator’s mobile phone. “Well, finally,” he muttered and looked at it. The message came from Bob:

*Can’t talk right now. Will be back soon. We found the letter to Julia! Attached is a photo of the typed letter.*

“Julia! Bob and Pete were successful!” Jupiter enlarged the photo. Together they bent over the display and read:

*My dear Julia,*

*I suppose you want to know how I dared to bequeath this dump to you. I want to tell you —not everything in this house is worthless. There is a hidden treasure. You’ve seen it before, but that was many years ago. You were afraid of it then, but you might not remember any of this.*

*If you want to find it, take the same path as the heroes of your favourite book. You’ll find the key in the grandfather clock, and if you’re wondering what it looks like, take a look in the display case.*

*Your loving grandfather,  
Hunter*

“That’s all?” asked Julia, irritated. “This is the stolen letter? That’s all my grandfather had to tell me?”

“I’m sure he had,” Jupe said. “We just have to solve his puzzle first. The thief has already tried the simple approach and dismantled both the clock and the display case, but he didn’t find anything. I suppose we have to think a bit more, otherwise it wouldn’t be a mystery.”

Jupiter took another look at the magnetic toys in the display case. Thoughtfully, the First Investigator pinched his lower lip. “‘You’ll find the key in the grandfather clock’,” he quoted from Hunter’s message, “but there’s no key there... which is why your grandfather added: ‘if you’re wondering what it looks like, take a look in the display case’... There I see magnetic toys. Does that mean the key in the grandfather clock is a magnet?”

Julia crouched down by the remains of the clock and stroked thoughtfully over the splintered wood, the brass pendulum and the weights attached to chains.

Suddenly her key, still dangling from her index finger, was magnetically attracted. Before she knew it, it was stuck to one of the two weights.

"It's magnetic!" she noted in surprise. "The other one isn't." The weight was only loosely hooked into the last link of the chain. It was easy to take it off. "What does this mean?"

"This means you found the key!" Jupiter exclaimed.

The First Investigator took the magnetic weight and walked to the cupboard. "Where was the *Narnia* book placed in this cupboard?"

Julia shook her head. "I don't remember that. I've hardly been in here in the last few years. The last time I saw this book was decades ago. If only I hadn't asked Bob and Pete to look through all the books, we'd know where it was placed."

"Perhaps I ask you in a different way—where is this door you spoke of?"

"I don't know if there really is a door. It just... feels like one."

"Where do you think it might be?"

"There," Julia said hesitantly and pointed to the left side of the shelf.

Jupiter walked up to it, held the cylindrical weight from the grandfather clock with the flat side against the back panel and slowly moved back and forth. He had reached about waist height when the weight in his hand was attracted by something metallic that was behind the wood.

Jupiter moved it carefully back and forth, suddenly it clicked—and a section of the cupboard swung open like a door!

## 14. In the Clock Tower

Julia gasped, startled.

“Just as I thought,” said Jupiter. “A secret locking mechanism that you can operate with the magnet. That way there’s no tell-tale keyhole to reveal the existence of a secret door.”

Behind the door, a steep and narrow staircase of rough timber led upwards parallel to the wall. The air in this narrow staircase was stale and warm.

Julia looked up into the darkness, sucked in the air and shuddered. “I know these stairs! I have been up there as a child—once, just once. Now I remember.”

“Tell me more,” Jupiter urged.

“My grandfather had read to me from the *Narnia* book—once again, my favourite part—the one where the children go through the wardrobe. Then he told me very mysteriously that there was also a magic door like that in this house. He went to the shelf and showed it to me. I was thrilled by the secret door, and also the narrow staircase. We climbed up together and then—” She fell silent.

“The crystal skull was up there,” Jupiter said, “and that’s what you were afraid of.”

Julia nodded.

“Understandable. You were a little girl, but now you know that the skull looks a bit scary at best. It’s not dangerous.”

“Right.” Julia Scott stepped through the secret door and climbed the steep steps to the top. Jupiter wanted to follow her, but the stairs began to sway slightly. It creaked and cracked in the narrow tower.

“The stairs look very home-made,” Jupiter observed, “and the wood has deteriorated. I’d rather wait until you’re up there first. Do you need light?”

“No need,” it came back dully. “It’s bright up here!”

Now Jupiter dared to climb up. There were only twelve steps leading to a tiny chamber housing the clock at the top of the tower. There was just enough space for Julia and Jupiter to stand next to each other. Nothing was really up here except for the clock mechanism.

The glass clock face was embedded on one side of the wall where the full moon shone brightly through past the hands and the darkly engraved hour markers. On the opposite wall, there was a small fixed glass window of about 30 centimetre square that could not be opened. Jupiter stepped up an old wooden box to look out of the window. The view was fantastic. At this height, one had a view across the forest, all the way down Lone Oak Hill to Rocky Beach.

Jupiter was so impressed that it was only after a few moments that he took note of the wooden box he had been standing on. It was a freight box with an address label stuck on the side. However, it was tattered and the writing on it was barely recognizable. When Jupiter tried to decipher it, he realized that it was an old handwriting of which he could not read a word. The letters looked foreign.

“The nails on this box are rusty, but I think we can still get it open,” Jupe said. “Shall we?”

“Go ahead,” Julia said.

When Jupiter lifted the lid, they saw an envelope placed on top of dark blue padded fabric packing material. The envelope had 'Julia' written on it.

Julia took the envelope, opened it, unfolded the letter and read:

*Lone Oak Hill, 3 March*

*My dear Julia,*

*Congratulations, you have solved the little puzzle! I hope it wasn't too difficult. Now look at the treasure I have hidden from you and everyone else for so long.*

...

Julia put the letter aside and reached into the box and carefully rummaged in the packing material. Embedded in it shimmered a curved crystal surface. She took the object out.

The crystal skull was life-size, but not very detailed. The nose opening was only an indentation, the teeth consisted of lines that cut through the crystal like a grid, and the jaw could not be moved. Most striking were the circular eye sockets, which had been cut into the head as if with a pointed cone and converged conically inside the crystal.

The skull was not a naturalistic representation of a real skull, but more reminiscent of the skulls from the Mexican Day of the Dead tradition.

Julia placed the skull on the lid of the freight box. The moonlight fell on it and made the eyes glow, similar to what Jupiter had seen at the ceremony in Luca's garden. The silvery glow in the eye sockets was an eerie sight. No wonder it had terrified a little girl. Now, however, Julia was more fascinated than panicked. Gently, she stroked the smooth crystal surface before turning back to the letter and continued reading:

...  
*When I was young, this crystal skull came into my possession. When you were six years old, I decided to let you in on its secrets. However, I had made a calculation without the fertile imagination of a little girl. You saw the skull and screamed in terror. You fled the clock tower and never wanted to return there. You didn't even want to enter the library again. I felt so sorry for you that I never mentioned the skull again. Eventually you forgot about the experience. Only the fear of the library remained.*

*I should have told you the story when you were grown up, but I was quite happy that no one knew about my secret hiding place and the skull.*

*This is one of the legendary Yucatán skulls. I bought it at an auction. It was in this postal package that could not be delivered and so was auctioned off. For thirty dollars, I got the winning bid for this freight box, the contents of which I did not know then.*

*I didn't attach much importance to the skull until one day, I stumbled across a book that had an article about the Yucatán skulls. You'll find this book in the library. In fact, there are seven of them in total, and they are said to have magical powers. They can focus cosmic energy and prolong life.*

*I know you don't believe in such things and actually I don't either. However, after reading the article, my interest was aroused and I started to look more into the subject. In the process, I met a man called Raphael Luca who knows a lot about such skulls and how to harness their powers. I tried out what he told me. Once a month, during the full moon, I exposed myself to the healing powers of the crystal skull. I remained in the best of health for decades.*

*What you should know, dear Julia, is that Raphael Luca really wants to have this skull. He owns the other six and wants to complete his collection. He's been coming by regularly over the last few years and offering me large sums of money for this seventh skull. I refused every time. My treasures were always more important to me than the money I could make with them.*

*Some time ago, another interested party visited me. The young man named Nicholas Unterthal claims to be a descendant of the man to whom the parcel was addressed at the time. The name Unterthal is indeed found on a letter that was enclosed in the freight box. However, the rest of the letter is illegible and I never bothered to check Nicholas Unterthal's story. I acquired the box and its contents legitimately. The skull is mine.*

*What you do with it now, I leave up to you—sell it to Raphael Luca, sell it to Mr Unterthal or keep it for yourself. You can do what you want with the house too. I've had ninety-nine full and healthy years. I'm happy as can be.*

*One of the reasons is you. Not every old man is lucky enough to have such a caring and loving granddaughter.*

*I thank you from the bottom of my heart, my dear Julia! Stay as you are!*

*Your loving grandfather,  
Hunter*

Julia sniffled and wiped her eyes. Then she sighed. "I missed talking to my grandfather one last time, you know. I was distraught that I couldn't be with him in his last days because of the stupid hurricane. This letter is a small consolation." She put the letter aside.

A glimmer of light groped through the forest and caught Jupiter's attention. A car was approaching, but then the light suddenly disappeared. Shortly afterwards, Jupiter's mobile phone vibrated. "A message from Bob:"

*Are back. With surprise. Come to the road. Alone.*

The First Investigator frowned.  
"What's wrong?" asked Julia.  
"There's trouble."

## 15. Growler to the Rescue

When Jupiter left the house a short time later, the air had cooled noticeably. A cold shiver ran through him. He crossed the clearing and followed the private roadway through the pitch-dark forest, but he didn't even get as far as the main road.

"Psst!" it came from a bush beside him.

Jupiter turned around.

Suddenly he was grabbed from behind. Someone twisted his arm behind his back. Before he could react, he felt sticky fabric tape on his wrists. Within seconds, he was tied up.

"If you scream, there'll be trouble," said a gruff voice in the darkness behind him.

There was a rustling sound and three shadows emerged from the forest—Bob and Pete, both with their hands tied behind their backs, and a tall, beefy man. He was limping badly. In his right hand, he held a gun.

"I'm sorry, Jupe," Bob said quietly. "I didn't write the message. The guy used my phone."

"I realize that..."

The person who had overpowered the First Investigator from behind now stepped forward. It was a wiry blonde woman in a leather jacket.

"Let me guess, fellas. Miss Unterthal?"

"—And her brother," Pete said. "Gwendolyn and Nic. They got us, I'm afraid."

"Your two friends told us everything we wanted to know," Gwendolyn spoke up. "So you are investigators."

"That is correct," Jupiter said, "and you are the descendants of a certain Alois Unterthal, who opened a jewellery shop in Florida a long time ago. Today you are the manager."

Gwendolyn raised an eyebrow in surprise.

"About seventy to eighty years ago, Alois Unterthal was supposed to have a package delivered to him," Jupiter continued impassively, "but because of the illegible address, it ended up first in an auction and finally with Hunter Scott."

"Clever little fellow," Gwendolyn remarked.

"For a while I thought you were in cahoots with Raphael Luca," Jupe continued, "but that does not seem to be the case. You want the skull for yourself—to sell it to Mr Luca, because he's willing to pay a lot of money for it."

"We actually wanted to settle the matter quite peacefully," said Nic Unterthal, "but since you wouldn't stay out of it and were snooping around our motel room, I'm afraid we're going to have to speed things up. Is Julia Scott still in the house?"

Jupiter did not answer.

"She is," Gwendolyn answered the question. "Her car is over there."

"Did you find the crystal skull after we used your friend's mobile phone to send you the letter?" Nic asked.

Again Jupiter was silent.

Nic Unterthal sighed. "I guess I'll have to go and see. Gwen, look after these rascals! I'm going to the house." He placed the gun into his sister's hand and limped off.

"She's the thief, Jupe," Pete enlightened the First Investigator after Nic had gone off.  
"She wore a wig and a moustache."

"Insightful," Jupiter thought. "Why the disguise?"

"None of your business," hissed Gwendolyn Unterthal.

Loud barking came from the house. Growler was completely freaked out. Nic Unterthal was yelling and swearing in the distance.

"Hunter Scott's dog doesn't seem to like your brother," Pete said with a smile.

Then Growler began to whimper as if in pain.

"My brother doesn't like dogs either," Gwendolyn said, smiling back coldly.

Growler continued to whine and Pete tugged furiously at his bonds. "He's hurting the dog! That evil lowlife!"

"Shut up!" Gwendolyn admonished him.

The whimpering did not stop. Pete was furious and all attempts to tear himself free with sheer force only made it cut deeper into his skin. So he did something else.

"Growler!" he shouted as loud as he could. "Over here, Growler, come here! Growler!"

"I said shut up!" Gwendolyn barked.

The whimpering stopped. For a few seconds, it was quiet. Then seventy kilos of muscle and fur galloped away from the verandah and a moment later, a fluffy shadow darted towards them.

"Growler, sic her, boy!" Pete yelled, tugging helplessly at his bonds before Growler leapt—and threw Gwendolyn Unterthal to the ground.

The gun flew into the woods in a high arc, Gwendolyn screamed and Growler licked her face enthusiastically.

"Come on, fellas!" shouted Jupiter.

They turned their backs on each other and each began to feverishly untie the others. Bob was the first to manage to tear the tape off Pete's wrists. Then everything happened very quickly and within a few seconds, The Three Investigators were freed.

"Come here, Growler!" shouted Pete enthusiastically and the Newfoundland finally let go of Gwendolyn to jump up to Pete. Then Pete raised his finger admonishingly, as he had seen Marcie Bronkowitz do, and Growler dutifully stayed on all fours.

Bob and Jupiter were immediately with Gwendolyn. The torn adhesive strips were enough to fix the woman's hands behind her back and prevent her from doing anything stupid. She resisted at first, but had no chance against them. Finally, she gave up her resistance.

"Now we should go help Julia," Jupiter said. "Bob, you stay here with Miss Unterthal, otherwise she might warn her brother."

The next moment, Jupe and Pete ran back to the house.

"Quietly," Jupiter admonished as they stepped through the door. "Nic doesn't need to know that we got away."

They crept across the thick carpet through the hall and up the stairs to the library. Pete glanced inside. "They're not here."

"Yes, they are," Jupiter said, pointing to the ajar secret door that Pete had not noticed. From there they heard voices. Jupiter crept closer.

Pete was astonished. "What are you up to?" he whispered.

"Wait and see!" Jupiter peered through the crack in the door into the secret chamber. Pete followed suit.

Nic Unterthal stood at the foot of the stairs and looked up at the clock chamber where Julia was crouched.

“Give me that thing!” he shouted.

“Forget it!” Julia held the skull up and weighed it in her hand like a shot-putter. “I’d rather throw this thing out of the window!”

Nic laughed. “There’s no opening up there, Miss Scott. I’m coming up to get you now. Hand over the crystal skull, otherwise I can’t guarantee your safety. These stairs look dangerous. You might have an unfortunate fall.” Unterthal stepped onto the first step. With each step up, the construction creaked and groaned.

“Jupe!” hissed Pete. “Shouldn’t we do something?”

“Something’s gone wrong here!” the First Investigator whispered back.

“I can see that as well...” Pete remarked.

“You’re right, Mr Unterthal,” Julia shouted back. “The stairs look dangerous... and do you know why? Because it’s old.”

She then kicked the bracket that connected the staircase to the wall with all her might. The fastenings tore out of the dilapidated wood of the wall and the whole staircase frame tipped to one side.

Nic Unterthal cursed and clawed at the handrail. However, the staircase did not collapse as Julia and Jupiter had previously planned. The narrowness of the secret chamber prevented the frame from toppling over, instead it just leaned against the wall—and held on.

“Goodness!” hissed Jupiter.

“So you’ve got that all worked out!” Unterthal growled angrily. He struggled with his injured leg, but managed to take one last big step and stood at the top step. “Now give me that skull!”

Julia took the skull firmly in both hands and hammered it against the glass window. The glass pane shattered and the shards rained outside.

“What are you doing!” cried Unterthal, startled.

“What as I have said—I’ll throw this thing out the window!”

... And she did.

The skull rumbled over the shingles and fell over the edge of the roof into the depths.

A second later, it shattered with a crystal clear crash.

## 16. The Secret in the Box

Unterthal's eyes widened. "Have you gone mad?"

"I had warned you," Julia barked.

The man struggled with his footing but managed to reach into the clock chamber. For a moment, it looked as if he wanted to attack Julia. Instead, he grabbed the freight box and began to stumble down the sloping stairs.

Jupiter knew he had to act now and signalled to Pete to follow him. The First Investigator tore open the secret door and stormed into the staircase chamber together with Pete. With all his might, he kicked the staircase frame repeatedly. Pete followed as well.

"You bloody brats!" roared Nic Unterthal angrily. "Where did—"

That was as far as he got. The structure of the frame finally gave way and the stairs collapsed with a loud crash. Unterthal fell down to the ground screaming. A cloud of dust rose.

"Julia, the staircase has collapsed!" shouted Jupiter. "Don't move or you'll fall down!"

"Don't worry, I won't. There's a ladder in the broom closet."

"We'll get that later. Stay where you are first," Jupe replied. "We have to look for him first."

Jupiter and Pete made their way through the rubble. It was so narrow that they could only walk one behind the other. Pete was the first to reach Unterthal.

Nic Unterthal had already fought his way out from under the collapsed staircase and freed himself from the wood fragments, but he was holding his leg with a pained face.

"Are you all right?" Pete asked. "Can you get up?"

"Get away from me, you brat!" hissed Unterthal. He tried to pull himself together, but sank back again with a groan.

"Should we call an ambulance?" Pete wondered.

"Leave me alone!"

"As you wish..." Jupe said, "then you just lie here until the police come."

"They are already here!" shouted Julia from above. "There's a patrol car pulling up right now."

Pete looked questioningly at the First Investigator.

"I took the liberty of taking a few small precautions after your last text message," Jupiter explained. "The message seemed very suspicious to me. Julia and I undid several staircase brackets and I called Inspector Cotta."

Inspector Cotta worked for the Rocky Beach police and knew The Three Investigators well. He had often helped them when a situation became dicey or when it was ultimately a matter of bringing a criminal to justice.

"I told Julia to hide the skull somewhere," Jupe whispered to Pete, "and then go up to the clock chamber as part of our plan to trap this guy. However, I didn't suggest that she take the skull up there with her. That was not well thought out—to my chagrin, but at least Cotta can be relied upon."

"Unfortunately, now the skull is gone," said Pete. "Oh well, let's go and meet Cotta. Nic can't leave here with his leg like that."

The two investigators had already got back out to the library when Pete turned to take another look through the secret door to make sure Unterthal wasn't just playing a trick on them. He saw that the man had scrambled to the freight box and opened it.

"Hey, what are you doing?" Pete asked.

"What's wrong?" asked Jupiter.

"That guy just opened the box," Pete said. "He took something out and put it in his pocket, I saw it clearly! It was a note or something."

The two investigators made their way back to Unterthal.

"I said leave me alone!" roared Unterthal angrily.

Inspector Cotta's voice came through to them. "Jupiter? Pete? Where are you?"

"In here!" shouted the First Investigator.

Shortly afterwards, the inspector shone a flashlight into the chamber. In his other hand, he held a gun.

"Thank you for coming so quickly, Inspector Cotta," Jupiter said. "The immediate danger has already been averted. You can take Mr Unterthal into custody and persuade him to hand over the document he has just pocketed."

Cotta sighed and lowered his gun. "What's going on here? Who is this man? It would be nice if someone could enlighten me."

Jupiter took over. He roughly told the inspector what had happened. The fact that the Unterthal siblings had threatened them with a weapon and were also presumably responsible for a break-in and damage to property in the library was enough for a provisional arrest.

Gwendolyn had already been arrested by a police officer outside the house. Cotta and another colleague now took care of Nicholas who had realized that he had no chance of escaping and offered no resistance. At least until Jupiter pulled the piece of paper Pete had talked about out of his pocket.

"Hands off, that's mine!" Nicholas Unterthal barked.

"It's not," Pete objected. "You stole it from the box."

"What is it?" asked Inspector Cotta.

"We don't know that yet," Jupiter said, "but it's Miss Scott's."

"And Miss Scott would be thrilled if someone would help her down from here!" shouted Julia from above.

Jupiter pocketed the paper and set off with Pete to fetch the ladder.

In the doorway to the library, they almost collided with Bob. "What happened? I heard a terrible crash. Surely that wasn't—"

"The skull," Pete said. "Yes, it was."

They quickly enlightened Bob.

"Did you see the skull down there?" Pete asked Bob. "How bad is it? Maybe you can glue it back."

Bob laughed bitterly. "Forget it. The thing is shattered into a thousand pieces."

Dejectedly, they fetched the ladder from the broom closet. Shortly afterwards, Julia was freed from her predicament.

A short while later, all of them went outside the house, where Julia and The Three Investigators provided the police with a few more details. Nicholas Unterthal was already handcuffed and sitting in the back seat of the police car. Cotta's colleague was about to direct Gwendolyn next to him.

"By the way, Miss Unterthal was the thief in the leather jacket," Jupiter told Julia.

"Wait a minute," Julia said to the policeman, looking Gwendolyn in the eye. "Of course! Now I finally know why you looked so familiar even with your disguise. I've seen you

before! You bumped into me in my hotel when I was in Florida for a wedding!"

"An unfortunate coincidence," Gwendolyn murmured.

"Coincidence? You've got to be kidding," Julia continued. "You know who I am and followed me. I told you about my grandfather's death and because of the hurricane, I had to reschedule my flight to Los Angeles. Then you even helped me to do just that saying that you know the travel agency right there in the hotel. I guessed you came here on an earlier flight."

"It was a kind of race that you didn't know about," Jupiter added. "Miss Unterthal broke down the front door, searched the house for the crystal skull, found the letter—but she didn't manage to find the secret hiding place. So to continue her search, she had to come during the household clearance in a disguise, so that she wouldn't be recognized by Miss Scott. Was it like that?"

Gwendolyn Unterthal's silence was as good as an admission.

"We'll sort out the rest of the story tomorrow at the police department," Cotta said firmly.

Then Gwendolyn was ushered into the police car. The inspector and his colleagues said goodbye and drove away.

The Three Investigators and Julia went back into the library. "Thank you, boys. Without your help, I probably would never have found my grandfather's secret hiding place."

Pete hung his head. "But the skull is broken—if only Jupe and I had intervened sooner! If we had collapsed the stairs right away, you wouldn't have had to throw it out."

"It was better this way, Pete," Julia said. "Nicholas Unterthal saw that the skull was destroyed and will never bother me about it again. For now, only we know it wasn't the real skull."

The Three Investigators looked at Julia with wide eyes as she walked to the debris of the grandfather clock, reached into a compartment in the wooden base and, grinning, pulled out the Yucatán skull.

"What? Is this the crystal skull?" exclaimed Jupiter in surprise. "Wait a minute! Did you smash the glass skull I bought from the creepy shop?"

Julia confirmed, nodding with a grin. "I hid the real skull and took the phoney one up there."

"Great, Julia!" Bob exclaimed.

"I could have thought of that myself," muttered the First Investigator.

"Yes, our mastermind here cannot stand it if a bright idea comes from someone else," Pete mocked the First Investigator who promptly punched him in the arm.

Julia continued: "After all, I didn't want any harm to come to the only truly valuable heirloom my grandfather left me!"

Jupiter cleared his throat audibly. "That was a clever move, Julia, but I would like to put a question mark over the assumption that the skull is valuable."

Everyone looked at him in surprise.

"What do you mean?" asked Julia. "Why shouldn't it be valuable? After all, the Unterthals were willing to take great risks to get it."

"Really? Great risks, yes, but did they really want the skull? Nicholas Unterthal seemed to be mostly concerned with the freight box earlier."

"He took a note out of the box," Pete said. "Have you looked at it yet, Jupe?"

"Not yet."

"Then it's high time!" Pete urged.

The First Investigator pulled the piece of paper out of his pocket. The paper was very yellowed and cracked dry when Jupiter unfolded it:

Dear Obermueller, Jan 8, 1938

Dein geschätzter Herr Untervogel!  
Die Befragung überprüfen wir Ihnen im Auftrag der Behörde.  
Der Untervogel trifft nun mit mir in Ihrer Zeitschrift  
Informationen ein und wird die Ergebnisse  
der Röntgenuntersuchungen machen mir des  
unfallärztlichen Leid ab mein geschreibt.  
Ein Gefallen kann mir geben mir Befragung für  
meinen Gymnasiums Lehr.

Mit freundlichen Grüßen  
Leopold Eschenbach

"What's this scribble?" Pete frowned.

"Sütterlin script," said Bob.

"Actually, it's *Kurrent* script, Bob," Jupiter corrected him. "Sütterlin is merely the name for the simplified form of—"

"Wait a minute," Pete interrupted the two. "You can read this? I can only see something in the signature."

"Me too," Bob confessed, "but I recognize the writing. It was used a hundred years ago or so somewhere in Europe. You see it in movies sometimes."

"It was used in German-speaking countries," the First Investigator clarified.

"So is this German?" Pete guessed.

"Probably," said Jupiter, "because I can only read the signature. Latin letters were used for that back then, because—"

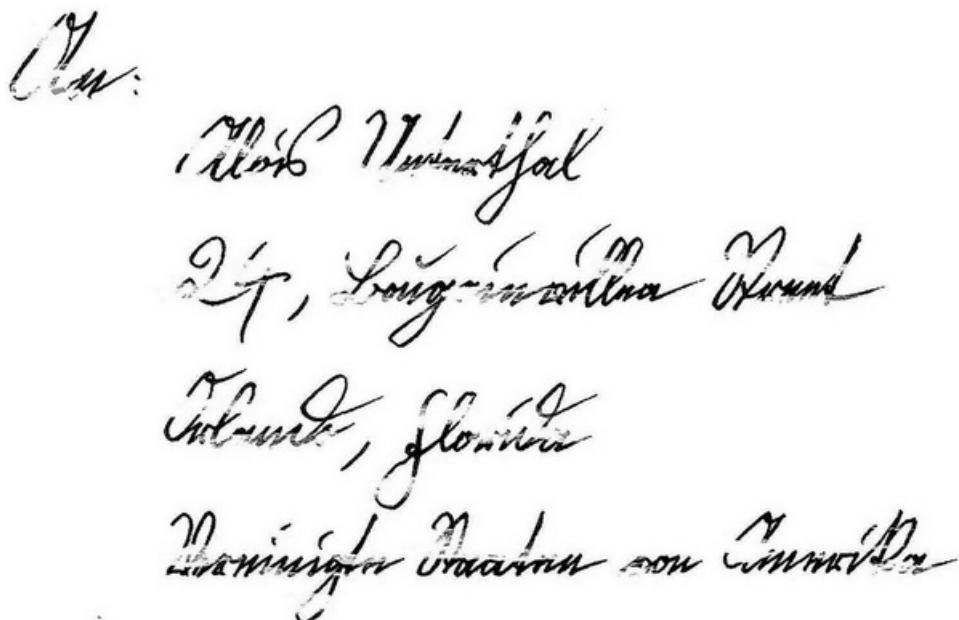
"I didn't really want to know that much, Jupe," Pete interrupted the First Investigator.

"Even my grandfather could never decipher this letter. Wait a minute..." Julia took out her grandfather's letter from her pocket and re-read a passage from it:

*... Some time ago, another interested party visited me. The young man named Nicholas Unterthal claims to be a descendant of the man to whom the parcel was addressed at the time. The name Unterthal is indeed found on a letter that was enclosed in the freight box. However, the rest of the letter is illegible and I never bothered to check Nicholas Unterthal's story...*

"Yes, with a little imagination the last word in the salutation could be 'Unterthal,'" said Bob.

"Wait a minute." Jupiter went into the secret chamber and returned a moment later with the freight box. He showed them the tattered piece of paper stuck to it. The characters were barely legible:



Dear Mr.  
Unterthal  
27, Longmeadow Road  
London, England  
Dominican Order on Cawood

"I can't make head or tail out of this!" Bob exclaimed.

"The sender of the parcel wrote the accompanying letter and the address in *Kurrent* script. When the package arrived in the United States way back then, no one could read the recipient's address, and there is no return address either. The package was considered undeliverable and ended up in the auction where Hunter Scott eventually acquired it."

"Wait a minute," Bob said, "before the Unterthals caught us at the motel, Pete and I were able to eavesdrop on them from the next room."

"Yes!" It also came back to the Second Investigator. "Nic was talking about some secret!"

"He said Julia must not sell the skull to Raphael Luca," Bob continued, "otherwise Luca would find out the secret of the skull and the Unterthals would be finished... and earlier he secretly wanted to make this letter disappear."

"So the secret could be in this letter," Pete said.

Julia shook her head. "I don't understand any of this. What kind of secret?"

"That's what we have to find out." Jupe narrowed his eyes and studied the letter more closely.

“So we need someone who could not only read this old script, but also understand German and translate it for us,” Bob said.

The First Investigator looked up. “Indeed, Bob... and I can think of someone already.”

## 17. Mr Meyer Makes Himself Useful

The next afternoon, The Three Investigators were waiting for Julia Scott at the salvage yard.

"I saw that Archie has found a new home," she called from a distance. "He's doing quite well out there by the road."

"Uncle Titus will be pleased," said Jupiter.

"—And Aunt Mathilda a little less," Pete chuckled.

"Have you found out anything about this illegible letter yet?" Julia asked.

"I quickly gave up trying to read it," Jupiter admitted. "I only managed one word—I was able to figure out the place written before the date in the top right-hand corner as 'Idar-Oberstein'."

"Idar-what?" Pete asked.

"Idar-Oberstein," Jupiter repeated. "I looked this up right away and found that it is a small town in Germany. This town is famous for its gemstones, among other things. Even hundreds of years ago, gemstones were mined there and made into jewellery. There are numerous gemstone-cutting workshops. Jewellery is also made from quartz crystal, which is what the Yucatán skulls are made of."

"Wow," Pete commented dryly. "I'm overwhelmed... but how are you going to figure out the rest of the letter?"

"Hopefully Mr Meyer will do the rest for us," Jupe replied. "If he's true to his habits, he should show up here soon..."

"That is if he—" Pete began.

"Oh, damn!" Bob interrupted the Second Investigator as he looked past him towards the main entrance of the salvage yard. "We've got company."

"Mr Meyer?" asked Pete, turning around. It was not Mr Meyer.

"Mr Luca!" exclaimed Julia in surprise.

"Indeed, Miss Scott. Are you paying a visit to your junk dealer?" Luca came closer, dressed all in white as usual, and gave Jupiter a contemptuous look.

"Yes, we... still have a few things to discuss," Julia said.

"That's a good thing. I would also need clarification." He pulled a small silver object out of the pocket of his white jacket. It was the business card case Julia had given Jupiter. "Does this look familiar, boy? You must have lost it in my garden."

Jupiter felt his back pocket. He had not even noticed the missing case.

"Investigators, eh? I thought you were a salvage yard assistant, Jupiter Jones... and these two other chaps are..."—he flipped open the case and glanced at the card—"... Pete Crenshaw and Bob Andrews, I suppose? Shall I call the police right away or do you want to explain to me what you were doing on my property last night?"

Jupiter cleared his throat. "There has been a criminal case in the last few days that you might not have been aware of, sir. Our investigation led me to your property."

"It doesn't matter as you were still trespassing. Let me tell you something, my friend—whatever you think you saw last night, you'd best forget about it real quick. Is that clear?"

Jupiter remained unimpressed. "You mean your ridiculous light show? I'd really like to know how much money you make from that baloney, Mr Luca—perhaps more than Cora

Corman makes with her music?"

"None of that is any of your business, understand?" Luca barked. "And what are you referring to by a criminal case?"

"It's about the crystal skull," Julia said. "I know why you wanted to buy my house, Mr Luca. You were hoping to find the seventh Yucatán skull in it."

Luca swallowed. "You are... remarkably well-informed."

"Thanks to The Three Investigators... You are right, by the way... My grandfather had indeed hidden the skull in the house, but you weren't the only one looking for it."

Now Luca looked alarmed. "What do you mean?"

"The Unterthal siblings," Bob said. "The name means something to you, doesn't it?"

"Gwendolyn Unterthal from Florida?" asked Luca in surprise.

Jupiter nodded. "She has already sold you three Yucatán skulls in the past and set out to get you the last one as well. Miss Unterthal's methods of getting the object of desire were a bit more thuggish than yours though."

"She didn't steal it, did she?"

"Fortunately, we were able to prevent that."

Luca breathed a sigh of relief. "So the skull is safe then?"

"That's it," Julia confirmed. "However, there are still a few mysteries surrounding that thing."

"Many mysteries," Mr Luca confirmed. "It is an object with a mysterious aura—an artefact that the cosmic energies in the highest degree—"

"Not that kind of mystery," Jupiter interrupted him gruffly, holding the illegible letter under his nose. "This letter was in the freight box where the seventh Yucatán skull was kept."

Mr Luca took a look at the letter and said: "What is this? I can't read this. What does it say?"

"That's exactly the mystery," Jupe replied.

"—And here comes the man who could clear this up," Pete said. "Mr Meyer is here."

Mr Meyer had entered the salvage yard at that moment and, as always, was heading purposefully for the corner with the new items. Nothing had changed there since yesterday, but Mr Meyer didn't seem to notice as he pushed his small round glasses from his nose up onto his forehead and back onto his nose again.

"Come on," Jupiter said and started to move. Curious, the others followed him. The Three Investigators approached Mr Meyer while Julia and Luca stayed in the background.

"Good afternoon, Mr Meyer," Jupiter said.

The little man looked up and adjusted his glasses. "Good afternoon."

"May I ask you something?"

Uncertainly, Meyer looked around. "Do we know each other?"

"I work here," Jupiter said kindly.

"Ah. Good. Listen. Those typewriters over there. The rollers are all damaged. Who did that?"

"I don't know," Jupe said hastily. "By the way, Mr Meyer, you are from Germany, aren't you?"

"Wrong. Very, very wrong," Mr Meyer said. "I was born in San Diego. My parents came from Germany and I am proud of my German heritage. Are you making fun of my accent? I have an accent because—"

"No, no, not at all," Jupiter affirmed. "I wouldn't have noticed at all. Listen, I have a letter here that I can't read. I thought maybe you could take a look at it."

Meyer frowned suspiciously, but took the piece of paper. He pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose and squinted his eyes. "You can't read this, can you?"

"Right."

"It's German, written in a historical form of handwriting—"

"I know that," Jupe interjected. "It's *Kurrent* script."

"Really?" Mr Meyer remarked. "If you know so much about this, then why don't you read it yourself?"

Bob and Pete simultaneously nudged the First Investigator with their elbows, one on the left, one on the right.

"Just let him translate it, will you?" Pete whispered to the First Investigator.

"Of course it's *Kurrent* script," Mr Meyer confirmed. "It's been a long time, but I can still read it... So you want to know what it says?"

"That would be nice, sir," Jupe replied meekly.

"All right." Meyer cleared his throat, looked at Jupiter, looked at the paper, looked at Jupiter again and said: "I'll translate. So... it says:"

*Idar-Oberstein, the Eighth of October, 1938.*

"Do you even know where Idar-Oberstein is?" Mr Meyer interrupted himself. "Well, uh... let's see what it says..."

*Dear Mr Unterthal!*

*As discussed, we are sending you the commissioned work. The skull now looks like in your drawing. Special attention was paid to the cutting of the eyes. The conical eye sockets now radiate the incident light as desired. If you like it, we will be happy to make six more copies as discussed.*

*Yours sincerely,  
Leopold Eschenbach*

Meyer lowered the paper. "I don't know this Mr Eschenbach."

"Neither do I," Jupiter said and took back the letter from Mr Meyer's hand. "Anyway, you have helped us a lot, Mr Meyer, thank you very much! Why don't you choose a book over there, if you like? It's on the house!"

Mr Meyer blinked in surprise. "Oh. I guess nobody wants this old stuff anymore, huh? And you thought—"

The Three Investigators simply left him standing there and returned to Julia and Raphael Luca, who were waiting by a rusty weight bench, near enough to overhear everything. Luca had turned pale and Julia's brow furrowed deeply.

"Did I understand correctly?" Julia asked. "The crystal skull was a commissioned work? So it's not from the Maya at all?"

"It certainly looks that way," Jupe confirmed with a grin on his face. He held out the letter to Luca who angrily snatched it and looked at it again.

"Alois Unterthal was the great-grandfather of Nic and Gwendolyn," Jupiter continued. "I assume he heard the reports of the first allegedly found crystal skulls at that time and decided to circulate some himself. He commissioned them from a factory in Germany including very specific ideas of what the skulls should look like."

"Then the first parcel did not get to him. We can assume, however, that sooner or later, Unterthal contacted Leopold Eschenbach's factory and had the six other skulls made. He then sold three of them extremely profitably, claiming of course that they had been found in a mysterious Maya site in Yucatán. The other three he kept, perhaps as a store of value for the future."

"—But he knew that there was a covering letter in the first freight box," Bob continued, "and that the forgeries would be exposed if that box ever turned up again. He passed this knowledge on to his descendants. The Unterthals eventually learned from you, Mr Luca, where this freight box had ended up—namely with Hunter Scott. From then on, they wanted to prevent the accompanying letter from falling into other hands—ours, for example—at all costs."

"But there's one thing I don't understand," Pete said. "In the book we found, it says that the Yucatán skulls have healing powers and so forth. There must be something to that."

"Just because it's in a book?" Jupiter looked at him questioningly. "Think about it, Pete—the stories that have spread about the skulls depend entirely on the stories that Alois Unterthal created and spread about them. He could make up the most fantastic tales! And that's what he did. After all, he wanted people to fight over his skulls. All those legends found their way into books like the one you found in Hunter Scott's library."

"So my grandfather just happened to get that old," Julia said.

Jupiter nodded. "The crystal skulls certainly don't have magical powers. They wouldn't have had them even if the Maya had created them." He looked over at Raphael Luca.

He sunk down on the weight bench. His face was chalky white, and he was still holding the letter in his hand.

"Are you all right, Mr Luca?" asked Pete. "Shall I get you a glass of water?"

"She ripped me off," said Raphael Luca, stunned. "I paid Gwendolyn Unterthal a fortune for the three skulls... and she knew the truth all along!"

"Well, Mr Luca," Jupiter said, crossing his arms in satisfaction. "That's what it feels like to fall for con artists."

"What are you saying?"

"What goes around comes around... but it's a fascinating story, isn't it?" Jupe said. "I'm sure this would also be of interest to your circle of friends who meet once a month in your garden."

Luca jumped up. "Don't you dare contact any of my clients—I'm warning you rascals now..."

"Calm down, Mr Luca," Jupe said. "We don't intend to do that, but we have just solved the mystery of the legendary Yucatán skulls. Surely you understand that we cannot keep these findings to ourselves. As investigators, we are committed to exposing dubious activities."

"We are acquainted with a professor of anthropology at Ruxton University who I am sure would be happy to write an article about this and publish it in a journal. I'm convinced the story will spread quickly from there. All we have to do is to give him the original copy of the letter. What you have in your hand, Mr Luca, is only a photocopy. You can keep it in case you wish to remind yourself of the origins of these crystal skulls."

Raphael Luca looked at him blankly. Then he threw the silver business card case carelessly onto the weight bench, turned around and left the salvage yard without another word.

"I guess you told him off real good," Pete murmured in awe. "Are you satisfied now?"

"I'm ecstatic!" Jupiter admitted frankly and grinned, until his gaze fell on Julia's face.

Julia Scott sighed. "I guess this is the day of broken dreams. The case is solved, but I can forget about Mr Luca or anyone else paying me a significant amount for the seventh skull."

Jupiter was startled. "Julia! I hadn't thought of that at all... but... but surely you understand—"

She nodded. "Of course I understand. You are right to publicly reveal the truth about the skulls... but it is a pity. Very briefly, I had hoped I could keep my grandfather's house, give up my little flower shop in San Francisco and start a new life here on Lone Oak Hill." She sighed again. "Instead, I guess we'll just get on with clearing up the house."

Sadly, she looked around the yard aimlessly. Mr Meyer was back looking at the typewriters. "How about it, guys? Tomorrow morning at ten? There's still a lot of books to go through... and maybe your uncle will be interested in a couple of sewing machines I discovered in the basement this morning."

## 18. The House of Julia Scott

"That's about it." Julia Scott wiped her forehead and put her hands on her hips in satisfaction. She had just brought to the library the last things she wanted to keep as a memento of her grandfather. Then she locked the door.

For two days, The Three Investigators had helped her sift through Hunter Scott's things, sort them and put price tags on them. Unlike last time, they were now well-prepared for the second household clearance, for which Julia had scheduled for today.

"I had a look at the list of things I hope to sell today," Julia said. "Even if I sold all of them, I would not be getting enough to change anything." She looked at the clock. "Anyway, it begins in one hour. Hopefully this time it will be in a civilized and orderly manner, without any incidents."

Bob, who was standing at the window, noticed movement between the trees. "Red alert!" He exclaimed. "There's a car coming... and it's Raphael Luca!"

The Three Investigators and Julia hurried down the stairs. The white Tesla had stopped in front of the house, and Raphael Luca got out. He looked as smug as ever. The frustration and indignation from their last encounter seemed to have left no trace.

"Good afternoon, Miss Scott! How are you?"

"Mr Luca..." Julia replied. "This is a surprise."

"I don't have much time, but I learned about your second household clearance today and thought I'd drop by quickly before the big rush starts."

"What can I do for you?"

"I want to buy the seventh Yucatán skull from you." He looked at Jupiter and smiled superiorly. "I suppose I can still call it that—or does our master investigator object?"

"You may call it whatever you like," Jupiter said annoyingly. "You know something, Mr Luca, it amazes me how people like you—"

Bob interrupted Jupe with a poke and whispered: "Come on, Jupe. He wants to buy the thing, so don't jeopardize it."

Luca ignored the investigators, turned to Julia and said: "How about it, Miss Scott?"

"How much?" asked Julia Scott.

"A quarter of what I offered you last time," Luca said. "Forgive me, my dear, but the value of crystal skulls has plummeted overnight."

Jupe pulled Julia aside and whispered to her: "Julia, before you reply to him, can you tell me your decision on this."

"Look, Jupiter," Julia replied. "I have no use for the skull so I might as well sell it. A quarter of his previous offer seems good to me. I could really use the money."

"In that case, let me try to get more money out from him," Jupiter said.

Before Julia could say anything, Jupe went back to Mr Luca. "The skull is yours for half your previous offer," Jupe said. "How about it?"

"Hold on here," Luca said. "I thought you guys are investigators, but are you also representing Miss Scott on the sale of items?"

Julia then came up from behind. "It's okay, Mr Luca," she said. "He was just helping. So, how about it? Half of your previous offer?"

Luca's face distorted for a moment, but then he said: "Believe it or not—I'm not an inhuman person. I liked your grandfather and would like to help his granddaughter out of a difficult situation."

Julia Scott grabbed Luca's outstretched hand. "Deal!"

"So shall I write you a cheque?" Luca asked.

Before Julia could respond, Jupe interrupted: "Cash please. Miss Scott needs to have the money before we give you the skull."

"Fine with me," Luca said. "Then I have to get to the bank and come back later."

"That will be great," Julia said, "perhaps after the house clearance ends at 4 pm?"

"Okay," Luca said. "Keep the skull safe for me. I'll see you at 4:30 pm." With that, he got into his Tesla and drove off.

"I can't believe that guy," Jupe remarked. "Anyway, the world is better off without con artists like him."

Pete and Bob exchanged glances but kept quiet.

Five hours later, Julia Scott had sold countless pieces of furniture and mountains of bric-a-brac. She had got rid of almost everything, and the rooms were now mostly empty.

"I sold more than I had expected," Julia told The Three Investigators. "Thank you very much for your help."

"You're welcome," Jupiter said, "but there is still one more customer—one that will make a huge purchase."

"Do you think he will come back?" Bob asked.

"I really hope he does," Julia said, "otherwise how would I be able to sell the skull?"

Promptly at 4:30 pm, the white Tesla of Raphael Luca pulled up to the house. He got out and in his hand was a black briefcase.

"Hello to you all again," Luca called out to Julia and The Three Investigators. "I'm here for the crystal skull."

He then handed the briefcase to Julia who went with The Three Investigators to the verandah to count the money. Satisfied, Julia asked Pete to go fetch the freight box with the crystal skull back in it.

While waiting for Pete, Jupiter approached Mr Luca. "So, Mr Luca... you'll never learn from this, do you? What are you going to do? Move to another city to continue to con other people?"

"No, of course not," Mr Luca replied coolly. "In fact, nothing of that sort..."

Just then, Julia came up and handed the freight box to Luca. "Here you go..."

Mr Luca opened the box, took out the skull and inspected it. "Well, finally!" he remarked, beaming. "The seventh skull!"

"By the way, Mr Luca," Jupe said. "I have some good news that you might be interested to know."

"And what would that be?" Luca replied.

"You remember what I told you about us submitting the original letter to a professor at Ruxton University?" Jupe began. "Well, I contacted Professor Henry Barrister today, and he told me that he had completed his article about the bogus crystal skulls. He even managed to get it into the journal that will be published next week. Isn't that great?"

"Wonderful!" Mr Luca exclaimed. "That's great timing, thanks to your efforts."

"What do you mean?" Jupiter asked, confused.

"Oh, since you are so insistent to know..." Luca began, "my collection of the seven Yucatán skulls—or if you prefer to call it the seven bogus crystal skulls—will soon be on display at the British Museum in London."

"Excuse me?" asked Julia Scott, blinking.

"The British Museum already houses another crystal skull whose authenticity has often been doubted," Mr Luca explained. "I spoke to the people in charge and told them the story of these seven Yucatán skulls. Yes, I told them the whole story and sent them a copy of the letter you gave me."

"I was able to convince them that the bogus skulls are definitely of cultural and historical interest and represent an impressive work of craftsmanship. Therefore, they are worthy of being exhibited in a museum in connection with their fascinating history of origin, of course. They were very interested in acquiring my collection, and I am in the process of negotiating with them a reasonable sum for all seven skulls."

Jupiter was dumbfounded and lost for words, while Pete suppressed a giggle.

"So, thanks for helping to get the article out in the journal," Mr Luca continued. "Next week, you say? I can't wait, because I could then use the article to secure an even better deal with the museum!"

The First Investigator shook his head slowly. "You are a businessman through and through, aren't you?"

"Is that forbidden?"

"No."

"I've gotta go now," Luca announced. "Thanks for doing business with me!" With that, he got into his Tesla and drove off.

"I can't believe it!" Jupe exclaimed. "He's a rascal!"

"It's all right, Jupiter," Julia said to calm down the First Investigator. "I've got what I wanted and now I can lay out new plans for my future. Things should go on well for me now."

"But that's not it!" Jupe insisted. "He's still—"

"For goodness' sake, Jupe, let it go!" Pete interrupted the First Investigator. "You can't have everything go your way all the time. When are you going to learn?"

"Anyway," Julia said to change the subject, "let's go in now..."

Still fuming, Jupiter followed the rest into the house.

Hunter Scott's granddaughter opened a bottle of beer and dropped exhausted into the leather chair in the living room.

"If I make a few things myself and sell my shop in San Francisco, I'll have enough money to renovate this house and start over," she said. "What do you think about a nursery up here on the hill? There's enough room on the property for a greenhouse and many new projects."

"A good idea," Pete agreed and The Three Investigators toasted her with Coke.

"And you know what would look great on the main road as an eye-catcher?" Julia asked. "A knight statue. He could hold a sign in his hand that says: 'Julia's Garden'."

"He could also stand on roller skates," Bob said and grinned.

Julia nodded. "That's how it will be. I'll buy Archie back from your uncle, Jupiter. I can afford it now. What do you think?"

Jupiter thought of Aunt Mathilda and laughed. "That would definitely win you a friend for life... and what better way to make a new start?"

